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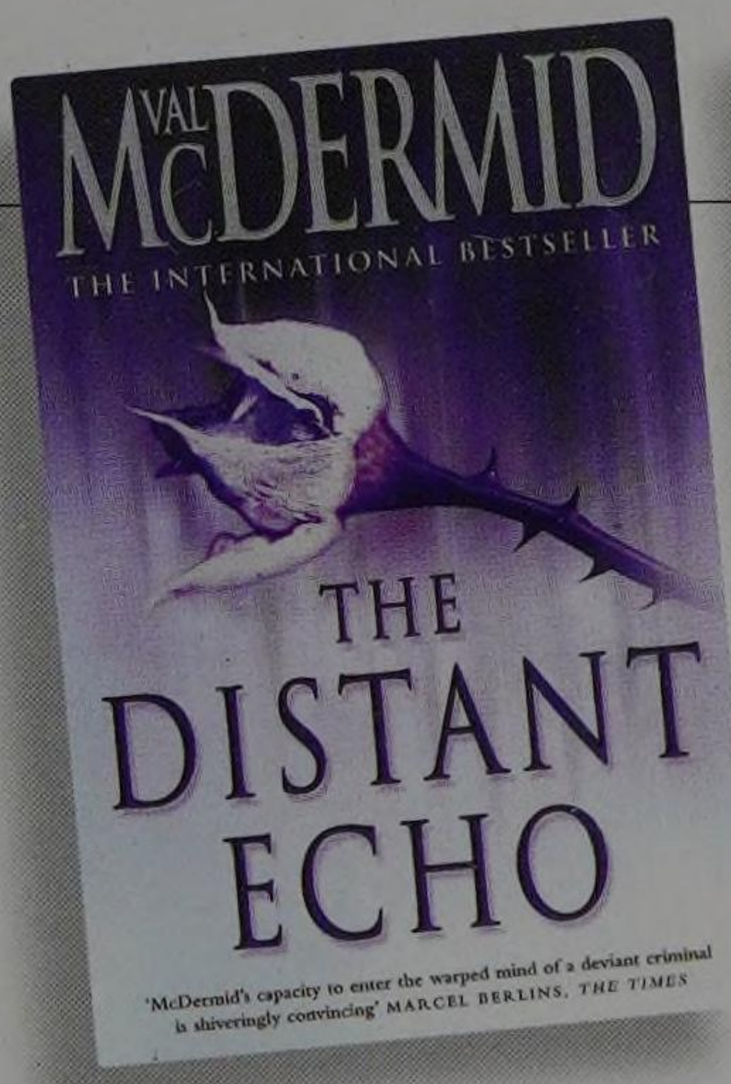

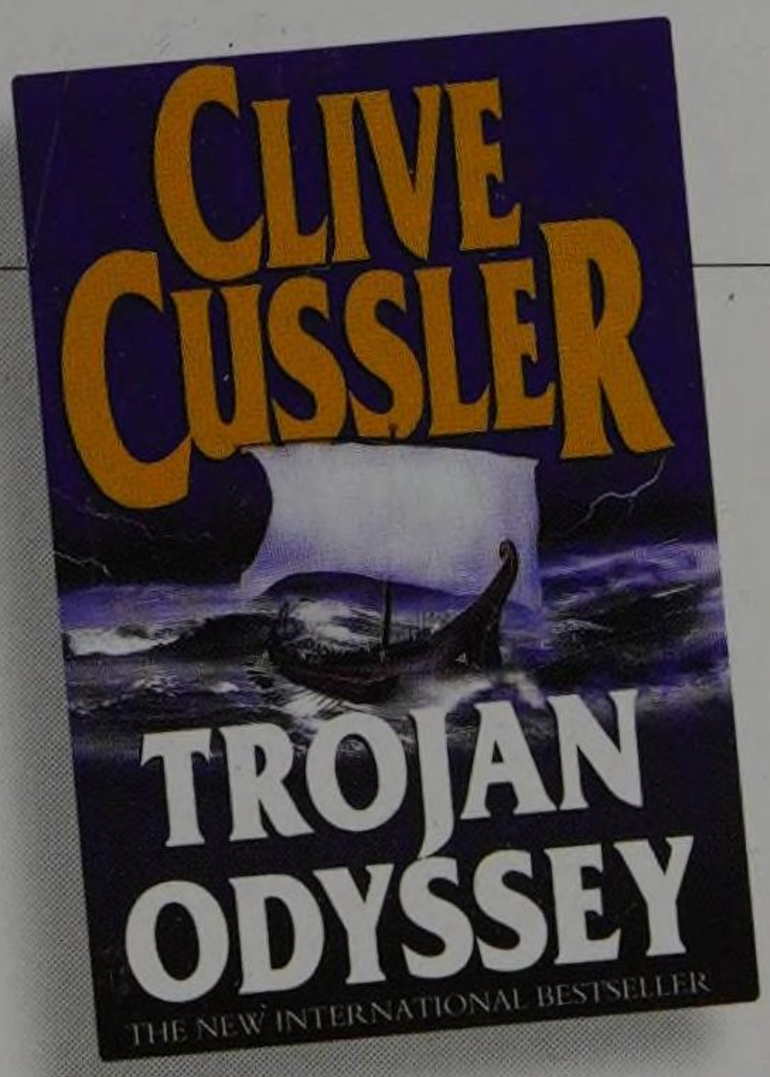

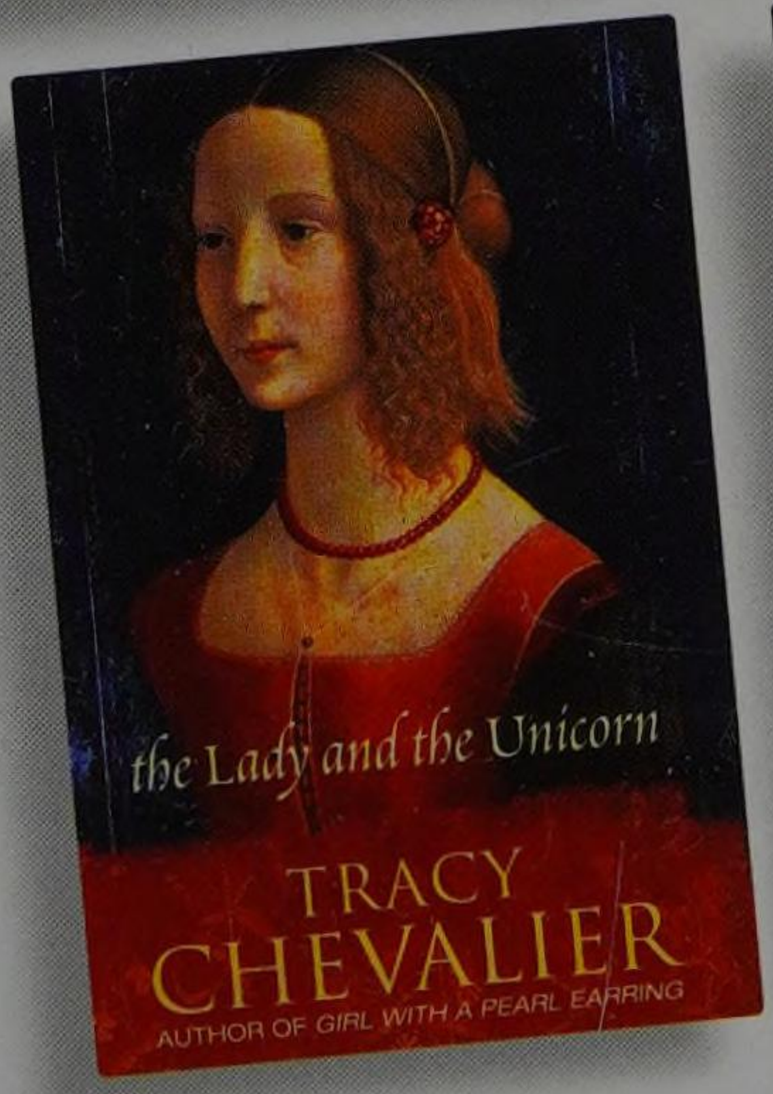

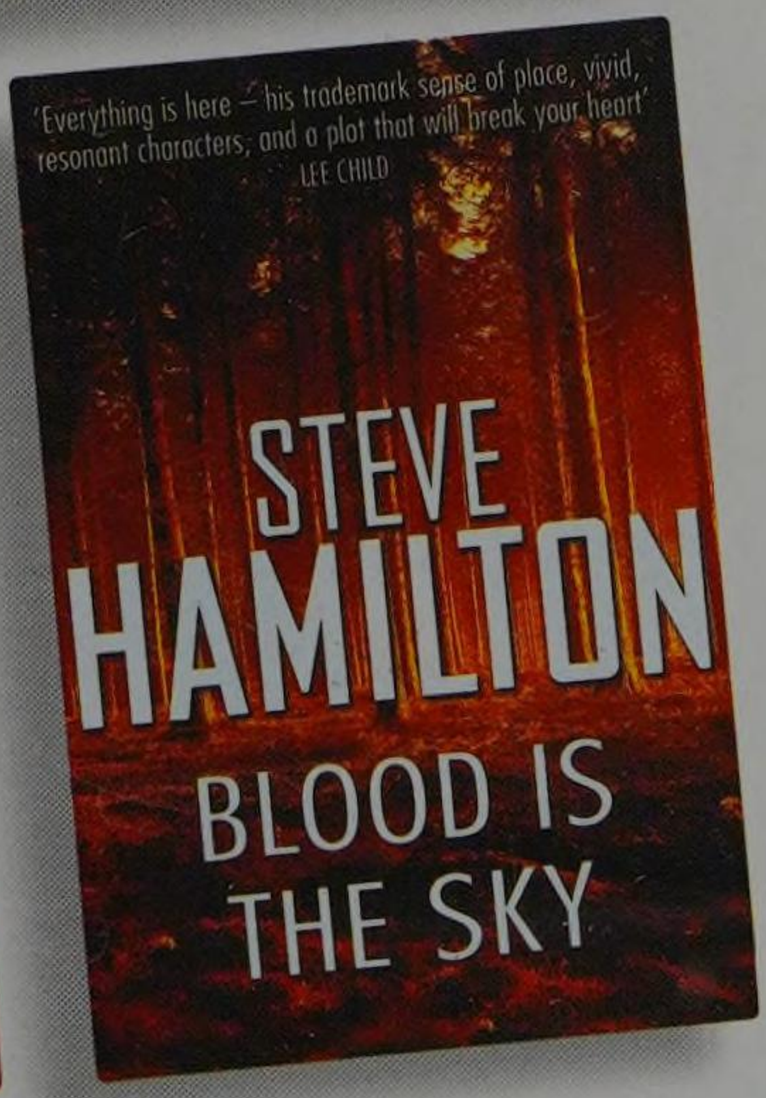

THE DISTANT ECHO

Val McDermid

Alex Gilbey and three friends are staggering home from a student party in St Andrews when they stumble across the body of a woman who has been brutally attacked and left for dead. When Alex reports the crime, he and his friends are viewed as suspects by the police. But evidence is elusive and it remains a baffling case. It isn't until twenty-five years later, when one of the men is murdered, that the answers start to emerge.

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TROJAN ODYSSEY

Clive Cussler

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The Reader's Digest Association Limited 11 Westferry Circus Canary Wharf London E14 4HE

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Printed in France
ISBN 0 276 42866 8

READER'S DIGEST BOOKS

Selected and condensed by Reader's Digest

THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION LIMITED, LONDON

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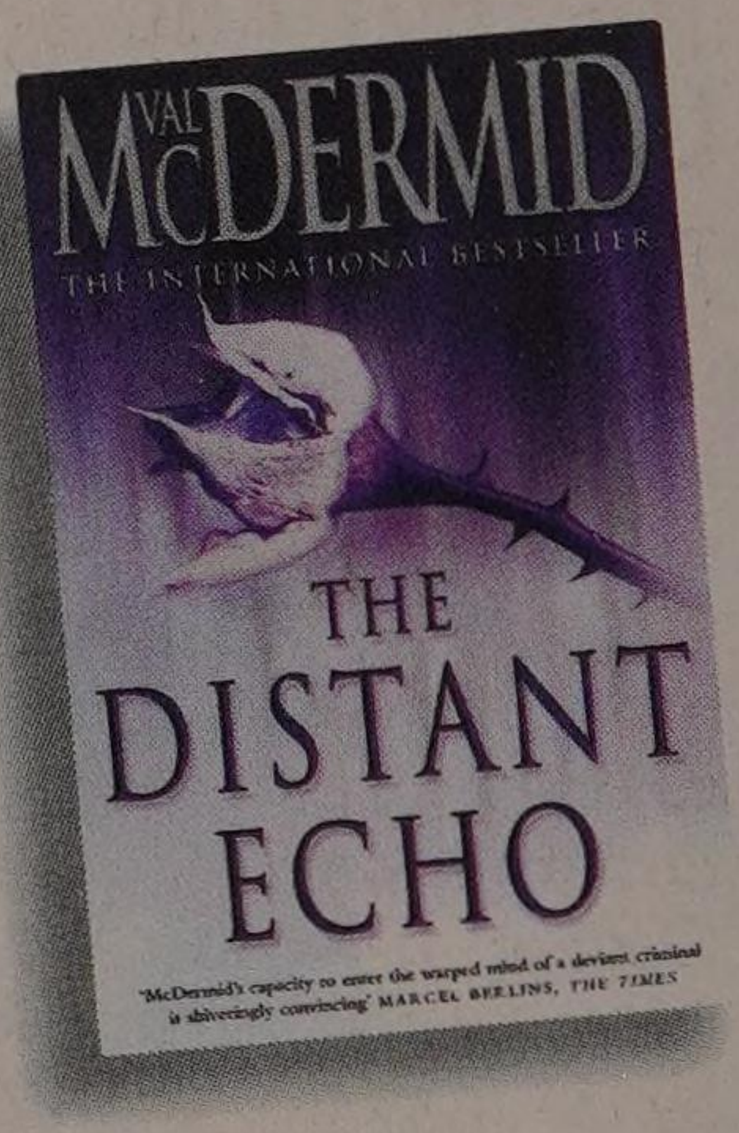

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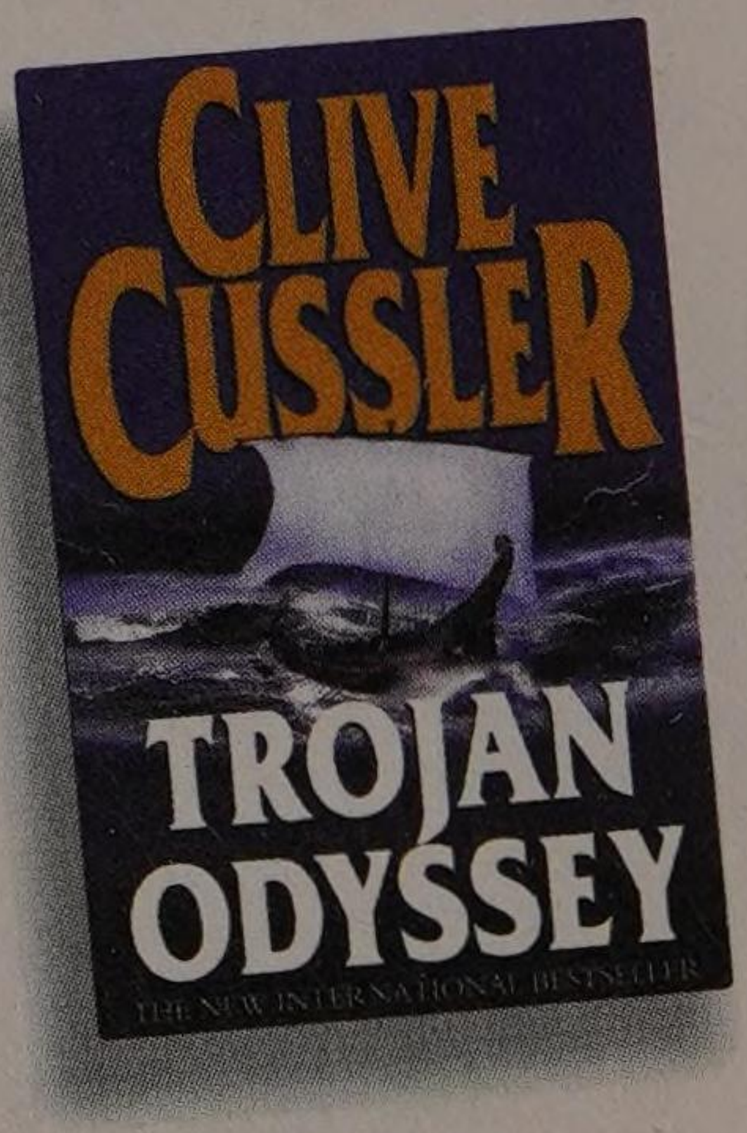


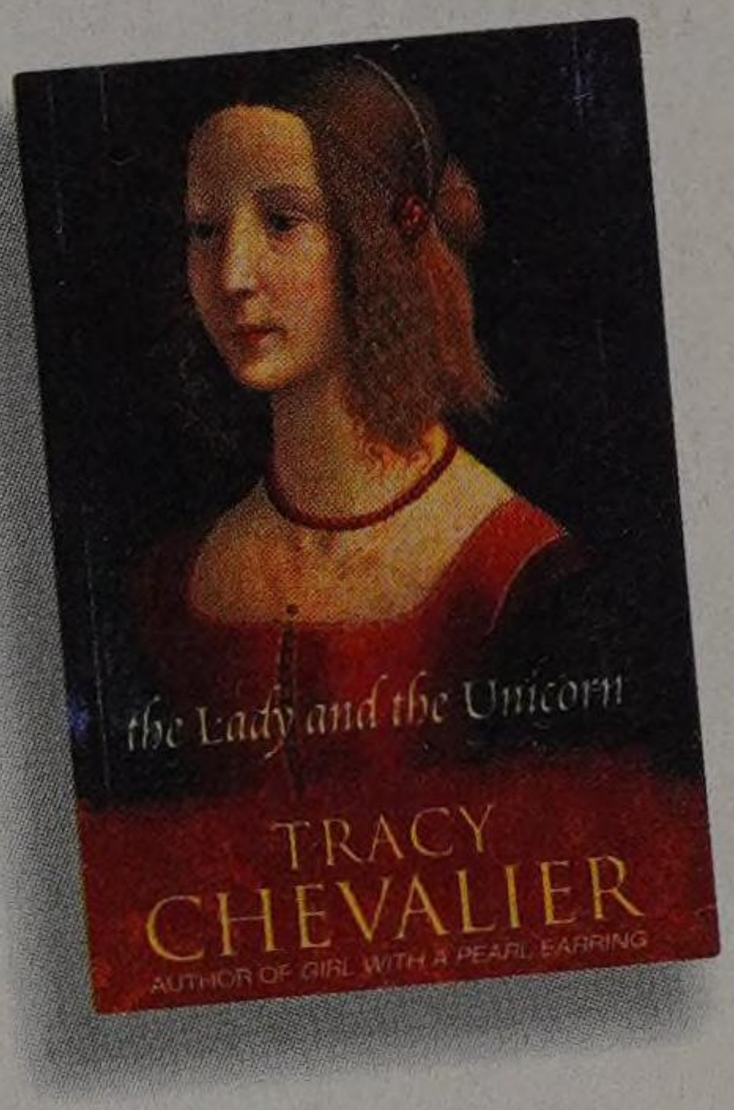
PUBLISHED BY MICHAEL JOSEPH

THE LADY AND THE UNICORN

page 301

Tracy Chevalier

When French nobleman Jean Le Viste hires Nicolas des Innocents to paint designs for a series of tapestries, the artist's arrival in the Le Viste household causes passions to flare. And in the Brussels workshop of Georges de la Chapelle, the demands of turning the bold designs into reality upset everyone, leading Georges to wonder if his family will ever be the same again. Historical fiction at its best, by the author of *Girl With a Pearl Earring*.



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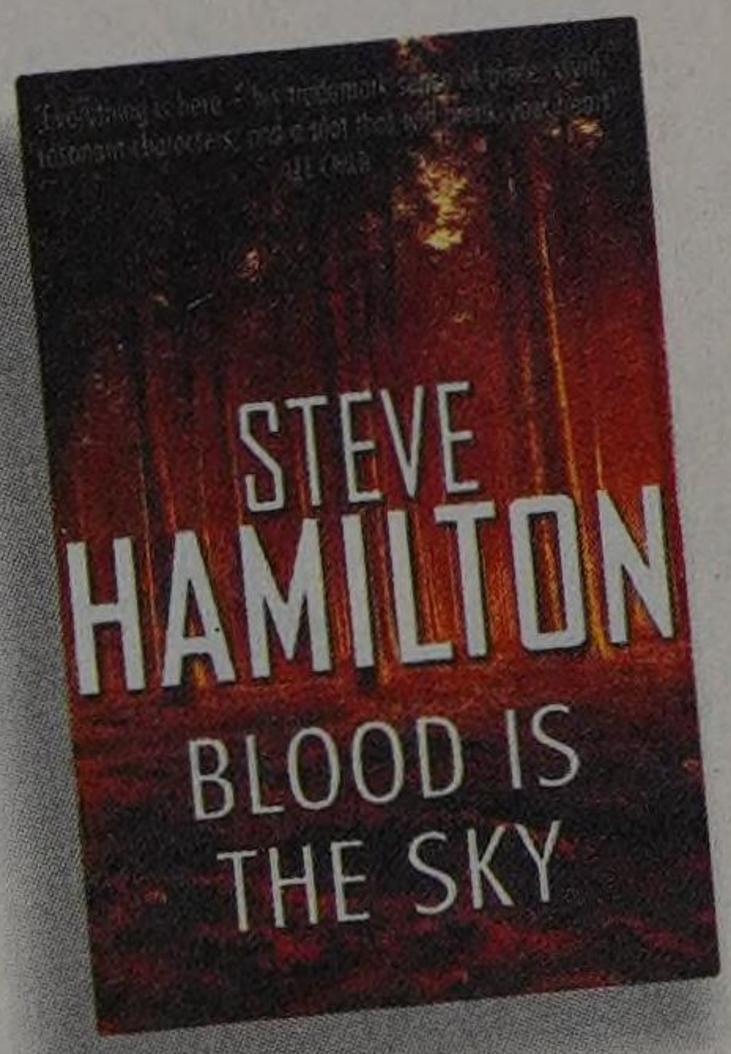
BLOOD IS THE SKY

page 405

Steve Hamilton

As winter draws in around Paradise, Michigan, Alex McKnight begins work on his log cabin with the help of his Ojibwa Indian friend and neighbour, Vinnie LeBlanc. But when Vinnie's brother, Tom, fails to return from a hunting trip, the two friends set off to retrace his steps, and in so doing uncover a terrible secret that puts their lives in danger. A taut and atmospheric thriller set in the heart of the Canadian wilderness.



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Val McDermid

THE

DISTANT ECHO

Four students marked with the blood of a murdered young woman. For the police it's an open-and-shut case—one of them must be guilty.

But for Alex Gilbey and his three best friends it's the beginning of a nightmare. The distant echo of what happened that terrible night lingers for the next twenty-five years, having an impact on their lives that none of them could have predicted.

PROLOGUE

November 2003; St Andrews, Scotland

He always liked the cemetery at dawn. Not because daybreak offered any promise of a fresh beginning, but because it was too early for there to be anyone else around. Even in the dead of winter, when the pale light was so late in coming, he could guarantee solitude. No prying eyes to wonder who he was and why he was there, head bowed before that one particular grave.

It had been a long and troublesome journey. But he was good at uncovering information. He'd trawled official and unofficial sources and eventually, after months of searching, he'd found the answers he'd been looking for. Unsatisfactory as they'd been, they had at least provided him with this marker. For some people a grave represented an ending. Not for him. He saw it as a beginning. Of sorts.

He'd always known it wouldn't be sufficient in itself. So he'd waited, hoping for a sign to show him the way forward. And it had finally come. As the sky changed its colour from the outside to the inside of a mussel shell, he reached into his pocket and unfolded the clipping he'd taken from the local paper.

FIFE POLICE IN COLD CASES REVIEW

Unsolved murders in Fife going back thirty years are to be re-examined, police announced this week. Assistant Chief Constable (Crime) James Lawson will head the review. He told the Courier, 'With modern forensic techniques, a single hair, a

bloodstain or a trace of semen could give us all we need to obtain a conviction.'

ACC Lawson was unwilling to reveal which specific cases will top the list for his detectives. But among them must surely be the murder of local teenager Rosie Duff.

The 19-year-old from Strathkinness was raped, stabbed and left for dead on Hallow Hill almost 25 years ago. No one was ever arrested in connection with her murder.

He could recite the article by heart, but he still liked to look at it. It was a talisman, reminding him that his life was no longer aimless. For so long, he'd wanted someone to blame. He'd hardly dared hope for revenge. But now, at long last, vengeance might possibly be his.

PART ONE

1

1978; St Andrews, Scotland

Four in the morning, the dead of December. Four bleary outlines wavered in the snow flurries that drifted in the northeasterly wind. The eight stumbling feet of the self-styled Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy traced the familiar path of their short cut over Hallow Hill to Fife Park, a hall of residence attached to St Andrews University, where their perpetually unmade beds yawned a welcome. The conversation staggered along lines as habitual as their route.

'I'm telling you, Bowie is the king,' Sigmund Malkiewicz slurred, his normally impassive face loosened with drink.

A few steps behind him, Alex Gilbey yanked the hood of his parka closer to his face and giggled as he silently mouthed the reply he knew would come.

'Bollocks,' said Davey Kerr. 'Pink Floyd can run rings round Bowie any day of the week.'

And they were off. Like wizards casting spells at each other, Sigmund and Davey threw song titles, lyrics and guitar riffs back and forth in the ritual dance of an argument they'd been having for the past seven years. Even their nicknames spoke of their early passions. From the very first afternoon they'd congregated in Alex's bedroom after school to listen to *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, it had been inevitable that the charismatic Sigmund would be Ziggy,

the leper messiah, for eternity. Alex had become Gilly, in spite of his protest that it was a jessie nickname for someone who aspired to the burly build of a rugby player. But there was no arguing with the accident of his surname. And none of them had a moment's doubt about the appropriateness of christening the fourth member of their quartet Weird. Because Tom Mackie was weird. The tallest in their year, his gangling limbs even looked like a mutation, matching a personality that delighted in being perverse.

That left Davey, loyal to the Floyd, steadfastly refusing to accept any nickname from the Bowie canon. For a while, he'd been known halfheartedly as Pink, but from the first time they'd heard 'Shine On, You Crazy Diamond' there had been no further debate; Davey was a crazy diamond, right enough, flashing fire in unpredictable directions. Diamond soon became Mondo, and Mondo Davey Kerr had remained through the remaining year of high school and on to university.

Alex shook his head in quiet amazement. Even through the blur of too much beer, he wondered at the glue that had held the four of them fast all those years. The thought provoked a warm glow that kept the cold at bay as he tripped over a raised root smothered under the blanket of snow. He cannoned into Weird, who gave him a friendly shove. Flailing to keep his balance, he let his momentum carry him forward and stumbled up the short slope. As he reached the summit, he hit an unexpected dip that pulled the feet from under him. Alex found himself crashing head over heels to the ground.

His fall was broken by something soft. Alex struggled to sit up, pushing against whatever it was he had landed on. Spluttering snow, he wiped his eyes with his tingling fingers. He glanced round to see what had cushioned his landing just as the heads of his three companions appeared on the hillside.

Even in the eerie dimness of snow light, the outline of a human form was unmistakable. Alex saw it was a woman, the wet tendrils of her dark hair spread against the snow. Her skirt was pushed up to her waist, her knee-length black boots looking incongruous against her pale legs. Dark patches stained her flesh and the pale blouse that clung to her chest. Alex looked at his hands and saw the same darkness contaminating his own skin.

Blood. The realisation dawned at the same instant that he noticed the faint but stertorous wheeze of her breath.

'Jesus,' Alex stuttered, trying to scramble away from the horror he had stumbled into. But he kept banging into what felt like little stone

walls as he squirmed backwards. 'Jesus Christ.' He turned desperately to his friends. 'There's a lassie here,' he shouted. 'She's bleeding.'

They wallowed through the snow to the crest of the hill and down the slope to where Alex stood. Ziggy crouched beside the woman, feeling for a pulse in her neck. It was there, but terrifyingly weak. Apprehension turned him instantly sober as he took in what he was seeing in the dim light. He was only a final-year medical student, but he knew life-threatening injury when he saw it.

Weird frowned. 'Hey, man, you know where this is?' Nobody was paying him any attention, but he continued anyway. 'It's the Pictish cemetery. These humps in the snow, like wee walls? That's the stones they used like coffins.'

Ziggy ran his hands over her torso, and felt the unnerving give of a deep wound. 'Mondo, got your lighter?'

Mondo produced his Zippo. He flicked the wheel and moved the feeble light over the woman's body and up to her face.

Ziggy inhaled sharply. 'Shit,' he gasped. 'It's Rosie from the Lammas Bar. We've got to get help. She's alive but she won't be for long in this state. Weird, Mondo—get your coats off.' As he spoke, he was stripping off his own sheepskin jacket and wrapping it round Rosie's shoulders. 'Gilly, you're the fastest. Go and get help.'

Alex scrambled back down the slope, churning the snow beneath his boots as he fought for purchase. He emerged from the straggle of trees into the streetlights that marked the newest cul-de-sac in the housing estate that had sprung up over the past six years. He set off at a slithering run up the middle of the road, trying to lose the image of what he'd just witnessed. How could that grievous thing among the Pictish graves be Rosie from the Lammas Bar? They'd been in there drinking that very evening, making the most of the last of their university freedom before they had to return to the stifling constraints of family Christmases thirty miles down the road.

He'd been speaking to Rosie himself that evening, flirting with her in the clumsy way of twenty-one-year-olds. Not for the first time, he'd asked her what time she was due to finish. He'd even told her whose party they were going on to. He'd scribbled the address down on a beer mat. She'd given him a pitying smile and picked it up. He suspected it had probably gone straight in the bucket. What would a woman like Rosie want with a callow lad like him?

Alex wondered where to run. There were plenty of houses nearby, but none of them was showing a light. Then he remembered. This time of night, there was regularly a police car parked up by the

entrance to the Botanic Gardens a quarter of a mile away. They'd seen it often enough when staggering home in the small hours of the morning, aware of the car's occupant giving them the once-over.

Alex was almost on the police car before he saw it. The policeman was already halfway out of his panda car. Alex slowed to a halt a couple of feet from the car, waiting for the driver to emerge.

The policeman set his cap straight and eyed Alex warily. 'What's going on, son?' he asked. In spite of the diminutive form of address, he didn't look much older than Alex.

'There's a lassie on Hallow Hill,' Alex blurted. 'She's been attacked. She needs help. She's got blood all over her. Can you get an ambulance or something? She's really hurt, man.'

'And you just happened to find her in the middle of a blizzard, eh? Have you been drinking, son?'

'Of course I've been drinking,' Alex said. 'Why else would I be out at this time in the morning? Look, me and my pals, we were taking a short cut back to halls and I tripped and landed right on top of her. Please. You've got to help. She could die out there.'

The policeman leaned into his car and launched into a conversation over the radio. He stuck his head out of the door. 'Get in. We'll drive up to Trinity Place. You'd better not be playing the goat, son.'

The car fishtailed up the street. At the end of Trinity Place, the policeman turned to Alex. 'Come on then, show me where she is.'

Alex set off at a trot. He was almost there when the young officer overtook him, stopping abruptly a few feet short of the small group.

Ziggy was still hunkered down beside the woman's body. Weird and Mondo stood behind him.

'What's going on here, then, lads?' the policeman asked.

Ziggy pushed himself wearily to his feet and shoved his wet hair out of his eyes. 'You're too late. She's dead.'

THE FOUR OF THEM were hustled off the hill, bathed in the strobing blue lights of panda cars and ambulances, and nobody seemed to have a clear idea of what to do with them. They stood beneath a street lamp, shivering under the frowning gaze of a grizzled officer in uniform. Eventually, a harassed-looking man huddled into an overcoat that looked two sizes too big for him slithered over to them.

'Mackenzie, take these boys down to the station, keep them apart when you get there. We'll be down in a while to talk to them.' Then he stumbled back in the direction of their terrible discovery.

The policeman herded them towards a police van, saying, 'I

wouldnae like to be in your shoes when the CID get off that hill.'

Alex shivered, though not from the cold. It was slowly dawning on him that the police were regarding him and his companions as potential suspects rather than witnesses.

When Mackenzie hustled them into the van, there had been a few seconds when they'd been left alone. Just time for Ziggy to mutter, 'For fuck's sake, don't mention the Land Rover.' Instant comprehension had filled their eyes.

At the police station it turned out there were insufficient interview rooms to keep them separate. Weird and Mondo were taken to unlocked cells, while Alex and Ziggy were left in the station's two interview rooms.

The room Alex found himself in was claustrophobically small. It was barely three paces square. It contained a chipped wooden table and four unmatched wooden chairs.

Alex wondered how the others would react to questioning. Weird had had more than drink tonight. Alex had seen him with a joint in his hand earlier, but with Weird, there was no telling what else he might have indulged in. Alex fervently hoped that whatever he'd taken it would have worn off before it was his turn to be interviewed. Otherwise, Weird was likely to piss the cops off very badly indeed.

Mondo would be another kettle of fish. This would freak him out in a totally different way. Mondo was too sensitive for his own good. He'd always been the one picked on at school, called a jessie partly because of the way he looked and partly because he never fought back. His dark hair hung in tight ringlets round his pixie face, his big sapphire eyes always wide like a mouse keeking from a divot. The lassies liked it, that was for sure. Alex had once overheard a pair of them giggling that Davey Kerr looked like Marc Bolan. But in a school like Kirkcaldy High, what won you favour with the lassies could equally earn you a kicking in the cloakroom. If Mondo hadn't had the other three to back him up, he'd have had a pretty thin time.

But Mondo would be on his own with the police. Alex could picture him now, head hung low, tossing the odd glance out from under his brows. They'd get frustrated with him, think he had something to hide. And of course tonight there was something to hide. And if anybody was going to blow it, it would be Mondo. Please God, let him not give up the Land Rover, Alex thought. At the least, they'd all be charged with taking and driving away without the owner's consent. At the worst, the cops would realise one or all of them had the perfect means to transport a dying girl's body to a quiet hillside.

Weird wouldn't tell; he had most to lose. He'd been the one who'd turned up at the Lammas grinning from ear to ear, dangling Henry Cavendish's key ring from his finger.

Ziggy wouldn't tell either. It was always safety first with Ziggy. After all, he was the one who had sneaked away from the party to move the Land Rover once he'd realised how off his head Weird was getting. Alex had no idea how long he'd been gone, but when he'd returned, Ziggy had told him the Land Rover was safely stowed off the Largo Road. 'We can pick it up in the morning,' he'd said.

Alex had grinned. 'Or we could just leave it there. A nice wee puzzle for Hooray Henry when he comes back next term.'

'I don't think so. As soon as he realised his precious wheels weren't parked where he left them, he'd go to the police and drop us right in it. And our fingerprints are all over it.'

He'd been right, Alex thought. There was no love lost between the Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy and the two Englishmen who shared their six-room house. There was no way Henry would see the funny side of Weird helping himself to the Land Rover. So Ziggy wouldn't tell.

But Mondo just might. Alex hoped Ziggy's warning had penetrated Mondo's self-absorption enough for him to think through the consequences. Telling the cops about Weird helping himself to someone else's car wouldn't get Mondo off the hook. It would only put all four of them firmly on it. Besides, he'd been driving it himself, taking that lassie home to Guardbridge.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR Barney Maclennan threw his damp coat over the nearest chair in the CID office. They'd got an ID right away. The pub Rosie Duff worked in was an occasional drop-in for some of the uniforms, and PC Jimmy Lawson, the first man at the locus, had recognised her immediately. According to the police surgeon, it looked like she'd been raped and stabbed in the lower abdomen.

Maclennan sat at his desk and made notes of what little information he'd learned so far. Rosemary Duff. Nineteen years old. Worked in the Lammas Bar. Lived in Strathkinness with her parents and two older brothers. Her father was a groundsman at Craigtoun Park. Maclennan didn't envy Detective Constable Iain Shaw and the WPC he'd sent up to the village to break the news.

He looked impatiently at his watch. He needed another CID man before he could interview the four students who claimed they'd found the body. He'd told DC Allan Burnside to get back to the station as soon as he could, but there was still no sign of him.

THE INTERVIEW ROOM that housed Ziggy was the double of Alex's. Ziggy slouched in his chair, half leaning against the wall, his eyes fixed on the middle distance. No amount of theoretical medical study had prepared Ziggy for the brutal reality of a human being so wantonly destroyed. He hadn't known enough to be any use to Rosie when it mattered, and that galled him. He knew he should feel pity for the dead woman, but his frustration left no room for any other emotion. Not even fear.

But Ziggy was also smart enough to know that he should be afraid. He had Rosie Duff's blood all over his clothes, under his fingernails. That was innocent enough, if the police believed his story. But he was also the man without an alibi, thanks to Weird's notions of what constituted a bit of fun. He really couldn't afford for the police to find the best possible vehicle for driving in a blizzard with his fingerprints all over it. Ziggy was usually so circumspect, but now his life could be blown apart by one careless word.

It was almost a relief when the door opened and two policemen walked in. Ziggy recognised the one who had told the uniform to bring them to the station. Stripped of his overcoat, he was a lean whippet of a man, his mousy hair a little longer than was fashionable.

He dropped into the chair opposite Ziggy and said, 'I'm Detective Inspector Maclennan and this is Detective Constable Burnside. We need to have a wee chat about what happened tonight.' He nodded towards Burnside. 'My colleague will take notes and then we'll prepare a statement for you to sign.'

Ziggy nodded. 'That's fine. Ask away.' He straightened up in his seat. 'I don't suppose I could get a cup of tea?'

Burnside left the room. Maclennan checked out his witness. The dark-haired lad opposite him had the pale skin and red cheeks of a Fifer, though the brown eyes were a bit unusual with that colouring. Wide cheekbones gave his face a chiselled, exotic air.

Burnside returned almost immediately. 'It's on its way,' he said, sitting down and picking up his pen.

They ran through the preliminaries quickly, then Maclennan said, 'Tell me what happened tonight. Let's have the whole evening, eh?'

'OK. The four of us, we live in the same unit in Fife Park. We ate together and then, about nine o'clock, we went into town. We were going to a party, and we wanted to have a few pints first.'

'Where did you go for your drinks?'

'The Lammas Bar.' The words hung in the air between them.

'So you'll have seen Rosie Duff? The dead girl?'

Ziggy shrugged. 'I didn't really pay attention.'

'What? A bonny lassie like that, you didn't notice her?'

'It wasn't her that served me when I went up for my round.'

'But you must have spoken to her in the past?'

Ziggy took a deep breath. 'Chatting up barmaids isn't my scene.'

'Not good enough for you, eh?' Maclennan said grimly.

'I'm not a snob, Inspector. I come from a council house. I just don't get my kicks playing macho man in the pub, OK? Yes, I knew who she was, but I'd never had a conversation with her that went beyond "Four pints of Tennent's, please."'

'So, you had a few pints in the Lammas. What then?'

'We went on to a party. A third-year mathematician called Pete that Tom Mackie knows. He lives in Learmonth Gardens. We got there about midnight and it was getting on for four when we left.'

'Were you all together at the party?'

'Have you ever been to a student party, Inspector? You walk through the door together, you get a beer, you drift apart. Then when you've had enough, you see who's still standing and you gather them together and stagger off into the night.'

'Do you usually all end up going back together?'

'Depends if anybody's got off with somebody.'

'Does that happen often?'

'Sometimes. We're healthy, red-blooded young men, you know?'

'But the four of you usually end up going home together? Very cosy.'

'Not all students are obsessed with sex, Inspector. Some of us know how lucky we are to be here and don't want to screw it up.'

'So you prefer each other's company? Where I come from, people might think you were queer.'

Ziggy's composure slipped. 'So what? It's not against the law.'

'That depends on what you're doing and who you're doing it with,' Maclennan said, any pretence of amiability gone.

'Look, what has any of this got to do with the fact that we stumbled over the dying body of a young woman?' Ziggy demanded. 'What are you trying to suggest? We're gay, therefore we raped a lassie and murdered her?'

'It's a well-known fact that some homosexuals hate women.'

Ziggy shook his head in disbelief. 'Look, just because Alex and Tom and Davey left the party with me doesn't make them gay, right?'

'And what about you, Sigmund?'

Ziggy held himself rigid, willing his body not to betray him. He'd arrived at a place where the truth was not going to be his friend.

'Can we get back on track here, Inspector? I left the party about four o'clock with my three friends. When we got to Hallow Hill, Alex tripped and fell. Next thing I knew he was shouting that there was a woman bleeding. I felt her carotid pulse. It was very faint, but it was still there. She seemed to be bleeding from a wound to the abdomen. I told Alex to get help. We covered her with our coats and I put pressure on the wound. But it was too late. She died within a couple of minutes.' He gave a long exhalation. 'There was nothing I could do.'

'Why did you ask Alex Gilbey to go for help?'

'Because Alex was more sober than Tom. And Davey tends to go to pieces in a crisis.'

It made perfect sense. Almost too perfect. Maclennan pushed his chair back. 'One of my officers will take you home now, Mr Malkiewicz. We'll want the clothes you're wearing, for forensic analysis. And your fingerprints, for the purposes of elimination. And we'll be wanting to talk to you again.'

There were things Maclennan wanted to know about Sigmund Malkiewicz. But they could wait. His feeling of unease about these four young men was growing stronger by the minute.

2

Mondo sat opposite Maclennan and Burnside, keeping his eyes on the table top. Burnside took him through the formalities with a politeness that surprised Mondo, who had been expecting *The Sweeney*, all shouting and macho swaggering.

When Maclennan took over, a note of sharpness entered the conversation. 'You knew Rosie Duff,' he said.

'Aye.' Mondo still didn't look up. 'Well, I knew she was the barmaid at the Lammas,' he added.

'Nice-looking lassie,' Maclennan said. Mondo did not respond. 'You must have noticed that, at least.'

Mondo shrugged. 'I didn't give her any thought.'

'Was she not your type?'

Mondo looked up, his mouth hitched up in one corner in a half-smile. 'I think I wasn't her type. She never took any notice of me. There were always other guys she was more interested in. I always had to wait to get served in the Lammas.'

'That must have annoyed you.'

'Not really. If we were in a hurry, I just used to get Gilly to go up when it was my round.'

'Gilly? That would be Alex Gilbey?'

Mondo nodded, dropping his eyes again.

'So she liked Gilly, did she?' Maclennan was relentless.

'I don't know. Far as I'm aware, he was just another customer.'

'But one she paid more attention to than she did to you.'

'Aye, well, that didn't exactly make him unique.'

'Are you saying Rosie was a bit of a flirt?'

Mondo shook his head, impatient at himself. 'No. Not at all. It was her job. She was a barmaid, she had to be nice to people.'

'But not to you.'

Mondo tugged nervously at the ringlets falling round his ears. 'You're twisting this. Look, she was nothing to me, I was nothing to her. Now, can I go, please?'

'Not quite yet, Mr Kerr. Tell us about the party. What were your movements there?'

Mondo twisted sideways in his seat, his desire for escape obvious in every muscle. Would the lassie he'd driven home in the Land Rover talk? He doubted it. She'd had to sneak into the house; she'd been supposed to be home hours before. And she wasn't a student, had known almost nobody there. With a bit of luck, she'd never be mentioned, never questioned. Stomach churning, Mondo produced an edited version he hoped would pass muster.

'We'll be checking your story out,' Maclennan said. 'You can go home now. We'll want the clothes you were wearing tonight. There'll be an officer at your residence to take them from you.' He stood up. 'We'll be in touch, Mr Kerr.'

WPC JANICE HOGG closed the door of the panda car as quietly as she could. No need to wake the whole street. They'd hear the news soon enough. She flinched as DC Shaw slammed the driver's door without a thought.

He turned and scowled. 'Come on, then. Let's get it over with.'

Janice prepared herself for the coming ordeal. She'd been brought in to deliver the bad news on more than her fair share of occasions. It came with the gender. She braced herself as Shaw banged the iron knocker on the door. At first, nothing stirred. Then a muted light glowed behind the curtains at the right-hand downstairs window. A hand appeared, pulling the curtain to one side. Next, a face. A man

in late middle age, hair tousled, stared at the pair of them.

Shaw held out his warrant card. A moment later, the front door opened to reveal the man, tying the cord of his dressing gown.

'What's going on?' he demanded.

'Mr Duff?' Shaw asked.

'Aye, that's me. What are you doing at my door at this hour?'

'I'm Detective Constable Shaw, and this is WPC Hogg. Can we come in, Mr Duff? We need to talk to you.'

'What have they laddies of mine been up to?' He stood back and waved them inside. The inner door gave straight onto the living room. 'Have a seat,' he said.

As they made for the sofa, Eileen Duff emerged from the door at the far end of the room. 'What's going on, Archie?' she asked. Her quilted nylon housecoat was buttoned awry.

'It's the polis,' her husband said.

The woman's eyes were wide with anxiety. 'What's the matter?'

'Could you come and sit down, Mrs Duff?' Janice said, crossing to the woman and taking her elbow. She steered her to the sofa and gestured to her husband that he should join her there.

'It's bad news, I can tell,' the woman said piteously.

'I'm very sorry, Mrs Duff. But I'm afraid you're right. We do have some very bad news for you.'

Mrs Duff pushed her husband. 'I told you not to let Brian buy that motorbike. I told you.'

Janice said gently, 'It's not Brian. It's Rosie.'

A soft mewing noise came from Mrs Duff.

'That cannae be right,' Mr Duff protested.

Janice forced herself to continue. 'Earlier tonight, the body of a young woman was found on Hallow Hill.'

'There's been some mistake,' Archie Duff said stubbornly.

'I'm afraid not. Some of the officers at the scene recognised Rosie. I'm very sorry to have to tell you that your daughter is dead.'

Eileen Duff threw her head back and roared her pain at the ceiling, her hands twisting in her lap, her whole body possessed by anguish. Her husband stared at her as if she were a stranger, his brows drawn down in a firm refusal to acknowledge what was happening.

Suddenly there were heavy footfalls on the stairs that led off one end of the room. Legs clad in pyjama bottoms appeared, followed by a naked torso then a sleepy face topped with a shock of tousled dark hair. The young man stopped a couple of steps from the bottom. 'What the hell's going on?' he grunted.

Without turning his head, Archie said, 'Your sister's dead, Colin.'

Colin Duff's mouth fell open. 'What?'

Janice stepped into the breach again. 'I'm very sorry, Colin. But your sister's body was found a short while ago.'

'Where about? What happened? What do you mean, her body was found?' The words tumbled out as his legs gave way and he crumpled onto the bottom tread of the stairs.

'She was found on Hallow Hill.' Janice took a deep breath. 'We believe that Rosie was murdered.'

Colin dropped his head into his hands. 'Oh Jesus,' he whispered.

Shaw leaned forward. 'We're going to need to ask you some questions, Mr Duff. Could we maybe go through to the kitchen?'

Eileen's first paroxysm of grief was easing now. She'd stopped wailing and turned her tear-streaked face to Archie. 'Bide here. I'm no' a bairn that needs to be kept from the truth.'

'Have you got some brandy?' Janice asked. 'Or some whisky?'

Colin stumbled to his feet. 'There's a bottle in the scullery. I'll get it.'

Eileen turned to Janice. 'What happened to my Rosie?'

'We can't be certain yet. It appears that she was stabbed. But we'll need to wait for the doctor before we can be sure.'

'Who would do a thing like that to Rosie?'

'We don't know that yet either,' Shaw chipped in. 'But we'll find him, Mrs Duff. We'll find him.'

'Can I see her?' Eileen asked.

'We'll arrange for that later today.' Janice crouched down and put a hand on Eileen's arm. 'What time did Rosie usually come in?'

Colin emerged from the kitchen carrying a bottle of Bell's and three glasses. 'The Lammas has last orders at half past ten. Most nights, she was in by a quarter past eleven.' He put the glasses down on the coffee table and poured three stiff measures.

'But some nights she was later?' Shaw asked.

Colin handed his parents a whisky each. 'Aye. If she was going to a party or something.'

'And last night?'

Colin swallowed some whisky. 'I don't know. Mum? Did she say anything to you?'

Eileen looked up at him, her expression dazed and lost. 'She said she was meeting some friends. She didnae say who, and I didnae ask. She's got a right to her own life.'

'How did Rosie usually get home?' Janice asked.

'If me or Brian was in town, we'd stop by at closing time and give

her a lift. One of the other barmaids, Maureen, she'd drop her off if they were on the same shift. If she couldn't get a lift, she'd get a taxi.'

'Where's Brian?' Eileen said suddenly, anxious for her chicks.

Colin shrugged. 'He's not home. He must have stayed in town.'

'He should be here. He shouldnae hear this from strangers.'

'He'll be back for his breakfast,' Archie said roughly. 'He needs to get ready for his work.'

'Was Rosie seeing anybody? Did she have a boyfriend?' Shaw tried to shunt the interview back on the track he wanted.

Archie scowled. 'She was never short of boyfriends.'

'Was there anyone in particular?'

Eileen took a tiny sip of whisky. 'She's been going out with somebody lately. But she wouldnae tell me anything about him.'

Colin snorted. 'Some married man, by the sounds of it.'

Archie glared at his son. 'You keep a civil tongue in your heid when you talk about your sister, you hear me?'

'Well, why else would she keep it secret?'

'Maybe she didnae want you and your brother sticking your oar in again,' Archie retorted. He turned to Janice. 'They once gave a laddie a battering because they thought he wasnae treating Rosie right.'

'Who was that?'

'That was years ago. The laddie doesnae even live here any more. He moved down to England not long after it happened.'

'We'll still want his name,' Shaw insisted.

'John Stobie,' Colin said mutinously.

'It's not a married man,' Eileen said. 'I asked her.'

'We'll need to take a look at her room,' Shaw said. 'Later today. So if you could avoid moving anything, that would be helpful. It would help also if you could make a list of her friends. Especially anyone who might know where she was last night and who she was with.'

MACLENNAN GAVE WEIRD a long, hard stare, taking in the intelligent eyes, the sharp beaky nose and the incongruously full lips. He didn't think Rosie Duff would have seen him as a desirable catch. She'd probably have laughed at him if he'd propositioned her. That sort of reaction could breed resentment.

'How well did you know Rosie Duff?' he asked.

Weird cocked his head to one side. 'Not well enough to know what her second name was.'

'Did you ever ask her out?'

'You've got to be joking. I'm a wee bit more ambitious than that.

Small-town lassies with small-time dreams; that's not my scene.'

'What about your friends?'

'Shouldnae think so. We're here precisely because we've got bigger ideas than that.'

Maclennan raised his eyebrows. 'What? You've come all the way from Kirkcaldy to St Andrews to broaden your horizons?'

'All I meant was that our lives had nothing in common with hers.'

'Tell me about the party,' Maclennan said. 'Who were you with?'

Weird considered. 'You know, I can't say I recall. But I was in the living room all night except for when I went upstairs for a piss.'

'What about the rest of your friends? Where were they?'

'I haven't a clue. I am not my brothers' keeper.' Weird's defences were firmly in place, and Maclennan could see that any further attempts to extract information would be fruitless. But there would be another day. And he suspected there would be another way under Tom Mackie's defences. He just had to figure out what that might be.

JANICE HOGG slithered across the car park in Iain Shaw's wake. They'd been silent on the drive back. As Shaw pushed open the door to the station, Janice caught up with him. 'I'm wondering why she wouldn't let on to her mum about who she was seeing,' she said.

'Maybe the brother was right. Maybe he was a married man.'

'But what if it wasn't? Who else would she be secretive about?'

'You're the female here, Janice. What do you think?'

Shaw carried on through to the cubbyhole occupied by the officer charged with keeping local intelligence up to date. The office was empty at this hour of the night, but the cabinets with their alphabetical filing cards were unlocked.

'Well, if her brothers had a track record of warning off unsuitable men, I suppose I'd have to think about what sort of man Colin and Brian would consider unsuitable,' she mused.

'And that would be what?' Shaw asked, pulling open one of the drawers. His fingers began to riffle through the cards.

'Well, thinking aloud . . . Looking at the family, that buttoned-up, Fife respectability . . . I'd say anybody they considered beneath her or above her.'

Shaw glanced round at her. 'That really narrows it down.'

'I said I was thinking aloud,' she muttered. 'If it was some toe rag, she'd probably think he could hold his own against her brothers. But if it was somebody a bit more rarefied . . .'

'Rarefied? You mean, like a student?' Shaw asked.

'Exactly.'

'Here we are,' Shaw said, pulling a couple of cards out of the drawer. 'I thought Colin Duff rang a bell.'

He read the first card, then passed it to Janice. It read: *Colin James Duff. DoB: 5/3/55 LKA: Caberfeidh Cottage, Strathkinness. Employed at Guardbridge paper mill as fork-lift truck driver. 9/74 Drunk and disorderly, fined £25. 5/76 Breach of the peace, bound over. 6/78 Speeding, fined £37. Known associates: Brian Duff, brother. Donald Thomson.* Janice turned the card over. In the same handwriting, but in pencil this time so it could be erased if called into evidence, she read: *Duff likes a fight when he's had a drink. Handy with his fists, handy at keeping out of the frame. Bit of a bully. Not dishonest, just a handful.*

'Not the sort of guy you'd want mixing it with your sensitive student boyfriend,' Janice commented.

She took the second card from Shaw. *Brian Stuart Duff. DoB: 27/5/57 LKA: Caberfeidh Cottage, Strathkinness. Employed at Guardbridge paper mill as warehouseman. 6/75 Assault, fined £50. 5/76 Assault, three months, served at Perth. 3/78 Breach of the peace, bound over. Known associates: Colin Duff, brother. Donald Thomson.* When she flipped it over, she read: *Duff junior is a lout who thinks he's a hard man. Record would be a lot longer if big brother didn't drag him away before the trouble really gets going. John Stobie's broken ribs and arm in 1975 likely down to him. Stobie refused to give a statement, said he'd had a bike accident.*

Janice always appreciated the personal notes their local record keeper appended to the official record. It helped when you were going out on an arrest to know if things were likely to turn ugly. And by the looks of it, the Duff boys could turn very ugly indeed.

ALEX WAS ON his fifth cigarette and wondering if the pack was going to last when the door to his interview room finally opened. He recognised the thin-faced detective he'd seen on Hallow Hill. The man looked a lot fresher than Alex felt. Hardly surprising, since it was getting on for breakfast time for most people. And Alex doubted the detective was experiencing the ache of a hangover at the base of his skull. He crossed to the chair opposite, never taking his eyes off Alex's face. Alex forced himself to hold the policeman's gaze.

'I'm Detective Inspector Maclennan,' the man said.

Alex wondered what the etiquette was. 'I'm Alex Gilbey,' he tried.

'I know that, son. I also know you're the one that fancied Rosie.'

Alex felt a blush rising across his cheeks. 'That's not a crime,' he

said. He speculated which of his friends had betrayed his interest in the dead barmaid. Mondo, almost certainly.

'No, it's not. But what happened to her tonight was the worst kind of crime. And it's my job to find out who did it. So far, the only person connected to the dead girl and the discovery of her body is you.'

Alex tapped nervously on his cigarette. 'Coincidences happen. I just got unlucky, finding Rosie like that.'

'So you say. But if I'd left Rosie Duff for dead on a freezing hillside and was worried I'd maybe got some blood on me, and I was a smart boy, I'd engineer it so I was the one found her. That way, I've got the perfect excuse for being covered in her blood.' Maclennan gestured at Alex's shirt, smeared with dried blood.

'I'm sure you would. But I didn't. I never left the party.' Alex was starting to feel scared.

'Can you provide witnesses to that?'

Alex squeezed his eyes shut, trying to quiet the pounding in his head enough to remember his movements at the party. 'When we got there, I was talking to a woman on my course for a while. Penny Jamieson. She went off for a dance, and I hung around in the dining room, just picking at the food. Various people were in and out, I didn't pay much attention. I was feeling a bit drunk. If I had blood all over me, don't you think someone would have noticed when I went back into the party? I joined in the dancing in the living room. Any number of people must have seen me then.'

'And we'll be asking them. We need a list of everyone who was at that party. And if Rosie Duff showed her face, even for a minute, you and me will be having a much less friendly conversation, Mr Gilbey.'

Alex felt his face betray him again and hurriedly looked away. Not soon enough, however. Maclennan pounced. 'Was she there?'

'I never saw her after we left the Lammas Bar.'

'But you invited her to the party.'

'I gave her the address. When we were in the pub. But she never turned up.' There was a sob in his voice now, his tenuous control slipping as he remembered Rosie behind the bar, animated, teasing, friendly. Tears welled up as he stared at the detective.

'Did that make you angry? That she hadn't turned up?'

'No. I never expected she would. Look, I wish she wasn't dead. I wish I hadn't found her. But I had nothing to do with it.'

'So you say, son. So you say.' All Maclennan's instincts told him there was something lurking under the surface of these interviews. And one way or another, he was going to find out what it was.

WPC JANICE HOGG pushed through the swing doors into the reception area just as the street door was barged open so hard it bounced against the wall. The force behind the door was a young man with shoulders almost as wide as the door frame. He hurtled towards the front counter, rage a deep growl in his throat. The duty constable reared back in shock.

'Where are they bastards?' the man roared.

'Can I help you, sir?' the PC asked, moving out of reach of the fists pounding on the counter top.

'I want those bastards that killed my sister,' the man howled.

So, Janice thought. The news had reached Brian Duff.

'Sir, I don't know what you're talking about,' the PC said gently.

'My sister. Rosie. She's been murdered. And you've got them here. The bastards that did it.' Duff looked as if he was about to clamber over the counter in his desperate desire for vengeance.

'Mr Duff?' Janice said quietly, stepping forward.

He whirled round. 'Where are they?' he snarled.

'I'm very sorry about your sister. But nobody's been arrested in connection with her death. We're still in the early stages of our investigation, and we're questioning witnesses. Not suspects. Witnesses.'

Duff glared at her. 'I was told you'd got them locked up. The bastards that did this.'

'Whoever told you made a mistake. Your family will be the first to know when we make an arrest. I promise you that.'

Duff looked baffled and angry. Then suddenly his eyes filled with tears and he slumped into one of the chairs in the waiting area. He wrapped his arms round his head and shook in a paroxysm of violent sobbing. Janice sat down next to him and waited until he regained his composure. His hands dropped like stones into his lap and he turned his tear-stained face to Janice.

'You'll get him, though? The bastard that's done this?'

'We'll do our best. Now, why don't you let me drive you home?'

Meekly, Duff stood up and nodded. 'Aye.'

Janice led Duff out to the car park and unlocked the car. Duff climbed into the passenger seat. Janice started the engine and edged the panda out of the car park onto the main drag.

'She lied to me,' muttered Duff. 'Said she was going to a Christmas party with Dorothy that she works with. But Dorothy turned up at the party I was at. She said Rosie had gone off to meet some bloke.'

'Maybe she didn't lie, Brian,' Janice said. 'Maybe she was planning to go to the party but something came up later in the evening.'

Hope lit Duff's face. 'You know, that's probably it. Because Rosie wasn't a liar.' Something struck him suddenly and his body tensed. 'Was she . . . you know? Interfered with?'

'We won't know for sure until after the post-mortem, but yes, it looks that way.'

Duff smashed his fist into the dashboard. 'Bastard,' he roared. 'Whoever did this, he better fucking hope you catch him before I do. I swear to God, I'll kill him.'

THE HOUSE felt violated, Alex thought as he opened the door into the self-contained unit the Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy had turned into their personal fiefdom. Cavendish and Greenhalgh, the two English former public schoolboys they shared the house with, spent as little time there as possible, an arrangement that suited everyone. They'd already gone home for the holidays, but today their braying accents would have been far more welcome to Alex than the police presence that seemed to dominate the very air he breathed.

Maclennan at his heels, Alex ran upstairs to his bedroom.

'We want everything you're wearing. That includes underwear,' Maclennan reminded him as Alex pushed the door open. 'We'd also like any diaries, appointment books and address books.'

'Alex, give the man what he wants.' Ziggy's cool tones cut through the atmosphere. 'We've all handed our stuff over. The sooner we get our space back, the sooner we can get our heads straight.' Ziggy stared at Maclennan. 'You see, what you and your minions seem to take no notice of is the fact that we have had a terrible experience. We stumbled on the bleeding, dying body of a young woman that we actually knew, however slightly.' His voice cracked, revealing the fragility of his cool surface. 'If we seem odd to you, Mr Maclennan, you should bear in mind that it might have something to do with the fact that we've had our heads royally fucked up tonight.'

Ziggy pushed past the policeman and took the stairs at a run, wheeling into the kitchen and slamming the door behind him.

'He's right,' Alex said mildly.

'There's a family up in Strathkinness who've had a far worse night than you, son. And it's my job to find some answers for them. If that means treading on your tender corns, that's just tough. Now, let's have your clothes. And the other stuff.'

Maclennan stood on the threshold while Alex piled his filthy clothes into a bin liner. He grabbed the bag from Alex and took the battered university diary he proffered.

'We'll be back, Mr Gilbey. Don't go anywhere.'

'We're supposed to be going home today,' Alex protested.

'That's the first I've heard of it,' Maclennan said suspiciously.

'We're due to get the bus this afternoon. We've all got holiday jobs starting tomorrow. Well, all except Ziggy.'

Maclennan considered. Suspicion didn't justify demanding they remain in St Andrews. Kirkcaldy was only a short drive away, after all. 'You can go home,' he said finally. 'As long as you don't mind me and my team turning up on your parents' doorsteps.'

3

Even though he felt light-headed with lack of sleep, Alex wasn't in the least drowsy. He got dressed and crept downstairs, not wanting to wake the others. Grabbing his cagoule, he headed out.

The snow had stopped, but the clouds were still low and heavy. The town seemed smothered in cotton wool. Alex struck out towards the university playing fields. In the middle of an expanse of white, he brushed a hockey goalmouth backboard clear of snow and perched on it. Try as he might, Alex couldn't get his mind as blank as the view. Images of Rosie Duff flitted behind his eyes like static.

Alex leaned down and grabbed a couple of handfuls of snow, clenching them tight until his hands started to turn purple with cold. Cold turned to pain, pain to numbness. He wished there was something he could do to provoke the same response in his head.

When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he nearly pissed himself. He whirled round. 'Ziggy,' he shouted. 'Christ, you scared me.'

'Sorry. I said your name, but you didn't react. I know you want to be on your own, but when I saw you go out, I came after you.'

'It's OK, Zig. I don't mind.'

'I was worried about you. I didn't know if you wanted to talk, away from the others?'

Alex shook his head. 'I've nothing much to say. I just keep seeing her face. I didn't think I could sleep.' He sighed. 'I guess we're all going to have demons to deal with after last night.'

'Some more practical than others,' Ziggy said. 'I don't know how, but Maclennan picked up on me being gay.' He bit his lip.

'Oh, shit,' Alex said.

'You're the only person I've ever told, you know that? Well, apart from the guys I've been with, obviously.'

'Obviously. How did he know?' Alex asked.

'I was being so careful not to lie, he spotted the truth in between the cracks. What if he says something to Weird or Mondo?'

'They're your friends. They're not going to turn their backs on you over that.'

Ziggy snorted. 'They're homophobic, Alex. You know that.'

'They've known you half their lives. That's going to count for a lot more than stupid prejudice. I didn't freak out when you told me.'

'I told you precisely because I knew you wouldn't freak out. You're not a knee-jerk Neanderthal.'

'They're not dinosaurs,' Alex said. 'They'd take it on board.'

Ziggy shrugged. 'Maybe you're right. I'd prefer not to put it to the test, though. And even if they're all right, what happens if it gets out? This isn't San Francisco, Alex. This is St Andrews. I've got years before I qualify as a doctor, and I tell you now, my career is dead in the water if Maclennan outs me.'

'It's not going to happen, Ziggy. I tell you what I'm a lot more concerned about.'

'What's that?'

'The Land Rover. What are we going to do about that?'

'We'll have to bring it back. There's no other option. Otherwise it gets reported stolen, and we're in big trouble.'

'I know that. But when?' Alex asked. 'We can't do it today. Whoever dumped Rosie there must have had some sort of vehicle, and the one thing that makes us look less like suspects is that none of us has a car. But if we're spotted tooling around in a Land Rover, we go straight to number one on Maclennan's hit parade.'

'Same thing applies if a Land Rover suddenly appears smack bang outside our house,' Ziggy said.

'So what do we do?'

'We wait till the heat dies down, then I'll come back and shift it. Thank God I remembered the keys in time to shove them into the waistband of my underpants. Otherwise we'd have been screwed when Maclennan made us turn out our pockets.'

'You're not kidding. You sure you want to move it?'

'The rest of you have got holiday jobs. I can easily get away. All I need to do is make some excuse about needing the university library.'

Alex put his arm round Ziggy's shoulders. 'You're a pal, Zig. Come on. Let's go back. I've got to finish my packing.'

BARNEY MACLENNAN looked round the CID room. For once it was packed out. Unusually among plain-clothes detectives, Maclennan believed in including the uniformed officers in his briefings on major cases. It gave them a stake in the investigation.

'The body of a young woman was discovered in the early hours of this morning on Hallow Hill,' he said, once they'd settled down. 'Rosie Duff was killed by a single stab wound to her stomach. It's too early for much detail, but it's likely she was also raped. So far, we've not got much to go on. Rosie was found by four students on their way back to Fife Park from a party in Learmonth Gardens. Now, they may be innocent bystanders, but equally they might be a hell of a lot more than that. They are the only people we know that were walking around in the middle of the night covered in blood. I want a team to check out the party. Who was there? What did they see? Have our lads got alibis? Are there any chunks of time unaccounted for? What was their behaviour like? DC Shaw will lead this team, and I'd like some of the uniformed officers to work with him.

'Rosie worked in the Lammas Bar. As I'm sure a few of you know?' He looked around, seeing a handful of nods, including one from PC Jimmy Lawson, the officer who'd been first on the scene. 'These four were drinking in there earlier in the evening. So I want DC Burnside to take another team and talk to everybody you can find who was in there last night. Was anybody taking particular notice of Rosie? What were our four lads doing? How were they acting? PC Lawson, you drink in there. I want you to liaise with DC Burnside, give him all the help you can to nail down the regulars.' Maclennan paused, looking round the room.

'We also need to do door-to-door in Trinity Place. Rosie didn't walk to Hallow Hill. Whoever did this had transport. Any vehicles seen on the move down that way in the early hours of the morning, I want to know about it. Chances are Rosie knew the person who did this. So we need to go through her life too. Any questions?'

To his surprise, Lawson raised a hand, looking faintly embarrassed. 'Sir? I wondered if there was any significance in the choice of where the body was dumped?'

'How do you mean?' Maclennan asked.

'It being the Pictish cemetery. Maybe this was some sort of satanic rite? In which case, could it not have been a stranger who just picked on Rosie because she was what he needed for a human sacrifice?'

Maclennan's skin crawled. What was he thinking of, not to have considered this? If it had occurred to Jimmy Lawson, it might well

occur to the press. And the last thing he wanted was headlines proclaiming there was a ritual killer on the loose. 'That's an interesting thought. And one we should bear in mind. But not one we should mention outside these four walls. For now, let's concentrate on the students, the Lammas Bar and the door-to-door. That doesn't mean closing our eyes to other possibilities. Let's get busy.'

Briefing over, Maclennan walked through the room. He couldn't help hoping they could tie this to one of the students. That way, they might get a swift result, which was what counted with the public.

ALEX LIFTED THE LATCH on the wrought-iron gate and walked up the short path to the little stone villa where he'd grown up. He fumbled his keys out of his trouser pocket and let himself in. Dumping his bag by the door, he shouted, 'I'm home.'

His mother appeared from the kitchen. 'Alex, it's lovely to have you back. Come away through, there's soup and stew. We've had our tea, I was expecting you earlier. I suppose it was the weather?'

He let her words wash over him, their familiar tone and content a security blanket. He hauled off his cagoule and walked down the hall to give her a hug.

'You look tired, son,' she said, concern in her voice.

'I've had a pretty terrible night, Mum,' he said, following her back into the tiny kitchen.

From the living room, his father's voice. 'Is that you, Alex?'

'Aye, Dad,' he called back. 'I'll be through in a minute.'

His mother was dishing up a plate of soup, handing him the bowl and a spoon. 'Away and sit with your dad. I'll heat up the stew.'

Alex went through to the living room where his father sat in his armchair. There was a place set at the dining table in the corner and Alex sat down to his soup.

Jock Gilbey gave his son the sort of scrutiny that schoolteachers are adept at. 'You don't look good,' he said. 'What's bothering you?'

'A terrible thing happened last night,' Alex said between mouthfuls. 'There was a girl murdered. And it was us that found her. Well, me, actually, but Ziggy and Weird and Mondo were with me.'

His father stared, mouth agape. His mother had walked in on the tail end of Alex's revelation and her hands flew to her face.

'Oh, Alex, that's . . . Oh, you poor wee soul,' she said, rushing to him and taking his hand.

'It was really bad,' Alex said. 'She'd been stabbed. And she was still alive when we found her.' He blinked hard. 'We ended up spending

the rest of the night at the police station. They took all our clothes and everything, like they thought we had something to do with it. Because we knew her, you see. Well, not really *knew* her. But she was a barmaid in one of the pubs we sometimes go to.' Appetite deserted him at the memory and he put his spoon down, his head bowed. A tear trickled down his cheek.

'I'm awful sorry, son,' his father said inadequately.

Alex tried to swallow the lump in his throat. 'Before I forget,' he said, pushing his chair back. 'I need to phone Mr Malkiewicz and tell him Ziggy won't be home tonight.'

Jock Gilbey's eyes widened in shock. 'They've not kept him at the police station?'

'No, nothing like that,' Alex said. 'We had journalists on the doorstep at Fife Park, wanting pictures and interviews. And we didn't want to talk to them. So me and Weird and Mondo eventually climbed out the toilet window and went off the back way. We're working at Safeway tomorrow, but Ziggy's not got a job, so he said he'd stay behind and come home tomorrow. We didn't want to leave the window unlocked. So I've got to phone his dad and explain.'

Alex went through to the hall. He lifted the phone and dialled Ziggy's number. He heard the ringing tone, then the familiar Polish-accented Scots of Karel Malkiewicz.

MONDO SAT crosslegged on his bed, within reach of his turntable. He was listening to his personal theme, 'Shine On, You Crazy Diamond'. The swooping guitars and the heartfelt anguish of Roger Waters's voice provided the perfect soundtrack for wallowing to.

And wallowing was exactly what Mondo wanted to do. He'd escaped the smother of his mother's concern that had swamped him as soon as he'd explained what had happened. It had been pleasant for a while, but gradually it had started to stifle and he'd excused himself with the need to be alone. The Greta Garbo routine always worked with his mother, who thought he was an intellectual because he read books in French. It seemed to escape her notice that that's what you had to do when you were studying the subject at degree level.

There was a knock at his door. 'Come in,' he sighed wearily.

It was his fifteen-year-old sister, Lynn. 'Mum thought you might like a Coke,' she said, waving the glass at him.

'I can think of things I'd rather have,' he said.

'You must be really upset,' Lynn said. 'I can't imagine what that must have been like.'

'Pretty tough. I wouldn't want to go through it again in a hurry.'

'It must have been awful for Alex. How is he?'

'Gilly? Well, he's hardly Mr Sensitive. He'll get over it.'

'Alex is a lot more sensitive than you give him credit for,' Lynn said fiercely. 'Just because he played rugby, you think he's all muscle and no heart. He must be really torn up about it, especially with him knowing the girl.'

Mondo cursed inwardly. He'd forgotten the crush his sister had on Alex. 'It's probably just as well for him he didn't know her as well as he'd have liked.'

'What do you mean?'

'He fancied her something rotten. He even asked her out. Now, if she'd said yes, then Alex would be the prime suspect.'

Lynn flushed. 'You're making it up. Alex wouldn't go around chasing barmaids.'

Mondo gave a cruel little smile. 'Wouldn't he? I don't think you know your precious Alex as well as you think.'

'You're a creep, you know that?' Lynn said. 'Why are you being so horrible about Alex? He's supposed to be one of your best friends.'

She slammed out, leaving him to ponder her question. Why was he being so horrible about Alex, when normally he'd never have heard a word against him? It dawned on him that, deep down, he blamed Alex for this whole mess. If they'd just gone straight down the path, somebody else would have found Rosie Duff's body. There was no getting away from it. He wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for Alex.

As he turned over the events of the past few days, Mondo remembered something he'd seen late one night. Something that might just ease him off the hook. Something he was going to keep to himself for now. Never mind all for one and one for all. The first person Mondo owed any duty of care to was himself. Let the others look after their own interests.

'WHERE WOULD you like me to start, sir?' WPC Janice Hogg asked, looking around at the wardrobe and dressing table in Rosie Duff's bedroom. There was a small table by the bed with a single drawer.

'You do the dressing table,' he said, turning to the bedside table and sliding open the drawer. It contained a fat book called *The Far Pavilions*, which Maclennan thought was just the sort of thing his ex-wife had used to keep him at bay in bed. He lifted out the book. Underneath was a diary. Maclennan picked it up.

If he'd been hoping for some confessional, he'd have been sorely

disappointed. The pages listed Rosie's shifts at the Lammas Bar, birthdays of family and friends, and social events. Dates were indicated with the time and place and the word, 'Him', followed by a number. It looked like she'd gone through 14, 15 and 16 in the course of the past year; 16 first appeared in early November and soon became a regular feature two or three times a week. Always after work, Maclennan thought. He wondered why they met then, instead of on Rosie's night off, or during the day when she wasn't working.

He glanced across at Janice. 'Anything?'

'Nothing you wouldn't expect.'

'Any sign she was on the pill?'

'Nothing so far.'

'She wasn't a virgin, according to the pathologist.'

'There's more than one way of losing your virginity, sir,' Janice pointed out, not quite courageous enough to cast aspersions on a pathologist who everyone knew was more focused on his next drink and his retirement than on whoever ended up on his slab.

Half an hour later, Maclennan took a last look round the room that had told him far less than he'd hoped about Rosie Duff. A girl who kept herself to herself. A girl who had taken her secrets to the grave, probably protecting her killer in the process.

As they drove back down to St Andrews, Maclennan's radio crackled. Seconds later, Burnside's voice came through loud and clear. He sounded excited. 'Sir? I think we've got something.'

ALEX, MONDO AND WEIRD had finished their shift stacking shelves in Safeway, keeping their heads down and hoping nobody would recognise them from the front page of the *Daily Record.* They bought a bundle of papers and walked along the High Street to the café where they'd spent their early evenings as teenagers.

Weird pointed to a snatched picture of the four of them on the doorstep of their residence. 'Christ, look at us. They might as well have captioned it "Shifty bastards suspected of rape and murder". Do you suppose anybody seeing that wouldn't think we'd done it?'

A similar picture appeared in the *Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald*, but thankfully on inside pages. The murder made it to the front of all of them, however.

'I tell you something,' Weird said. 'We better pray Maclennan finds out who did this and puts him away.'

'Why?' Mondo asked.

'Because if he doesn't, all anybody's going to remember is that

we're the four who spent the night at the police station. We're going to get a not proven verdict without a trial. "We all know they did it, the police just couldn't prove it,"' he added, mimicking a woman's voice.

Before any of them could say more, they were interrupted by Ziggy, shaking rain from his hair. 'I thought I'd find you here,' he said. 'Maclennan's here. He wants to talk to us again.'

Alex raised his eyebrows. 'He wants to drag us back to St Andrews?'

Ziggy shook his head. 'No. He's here in Kirkcaldy. He wants us to come to the police station now.'

TEN MINUTES LATER, Ziggy was sitting alone in an interview room. When they'd arrived at the police station, Alex, Weird and Mondo had been taken to a separate room. Maclennan and Burnside sat opposite Ziggy.

'Lying to the police is a serious business,' Maclennan said. 'Not only is it an offence, it also makes us wonder what you've got to hide. Would you care to revise your earlier statement?'

Ziggy said nothing, waiting for Maclennan to make his move.

Maclennan opened his file and pulled out the fingerprint sheet that Ziggy had signed the previous day. 'These are your fingerprints?'

Ziggy nodded. He knew what was coming now.

'Can you explain how they came to be on the steering wheel and gearstick of a Land Rover registered to a Mr Henry Cavendish, found abandoned this morning on Largo Road, St Andrews?'

Ziggy closed his eyes momentarily. 'Yes, I can. The Land Rover belongs to one of the other students who shares the house with us. We borrowed it last night to get to the party.'

'You borrowed it? You mean, Mr Cavendish gave you his permission to ride around in his Land Rover?'

'Not exactly, no. Look, I know we shouldn't have taken it, but it was no big deal.'

'It's a criminal offence. So, you stole the Land Rover and took it to the party. That doesn't explain how it ended up where it did.'

'I moved it there for safety. We were drinking and I didn't want any of us to be tempted to drive it when we were drunk.'

'When exactly did you move it?'

'I don't know exactly. Probably some time between one and two in the morning. I was gone for as long as it took to move the Land Rover and walk back. Maybe twenty minutes.'

'We've been speaking to some of the people at the party, and we've not had many sightings of you. I think you were away for a lot longer

than that. I think you came across Rosie Duff and offered her a lift.'

'No!'

Maclennan continued relentlessly. 'And something happened that made you angry, and you raped her. Then you realised that she could destroy your life if she went to the police. You panicked and you killed her. You knew you had to dump the body, but you had the Land Rover, so that wasn't a big deal. And then you cleaned yourself up and went back to the party. Isn't that how it happened?'

Ziggy shook his head. 'No. You've got to believe me. I had nothing to do with her death.'

'Why should I believe you?'

'Because I'm telling you the truth.'

'No. What you're telling me is a new version of events that covers what you think I know. I don't think it's the whole truth.'

There was a long silence. Maclennan spoke again. 'Right now, we've got a team of forensic experts going over every inch of that Land Rover. If we find one spot of blood, one hair from Rosie Duff's head, one fibre from her clothes, it'll be a very long time before you sleep in your own bed again. You could save yourself a lot of grief if you tell us everything now.'

'I've got nothing more to say.'

'Have it your own way, son. I'm arresting you for taking and driving away a motor vehicle without the owner's consent. You'll be bailed to report to the police station in a week's time.' Maclennan pushed his chair back. 'I suggest you get a lawyer, Mr Malkiewicz.'

WEIRD WAS NEXT UP. It had to be the Land Rover, he'd decided as they'd sat in silence in the interview room. OK, he'd hold his hand up, carry the can. He wasn't going to let the others take the blame for his stupidity. They wouldn't send him to jail, not for something so trivial. It would be a fine, and he could pay that off somehow. You could be a mathematician with a criminal record.

He slouched in the chair opposite Maclennan and Burnside, trying to look casual. 'How can I help?' he said.

'The truth would be a start,' Maclennan said. 'Somehow, it slipped your mind that you'd been joy-riding in a Land Rover when you were supposed to be partying.'

'It's a fair cop. Just youthful high spirits, Officer.'

Maclennan slammed his hands down on the table. 'This isn't a game, son. This is murder. So stop acting the goat.'

'But that's all it was, really. Look, the weather was shite. The

others went ahead to the Lammas while I finished doing the dishes. I was standing in the kitchen looking out at the Land Rover, and I thought, why not? Henry's away back to England and nobody would be any the wiser if I borrowed it for a few hours. So I took it down the pub. The other three were pissed off with me, but when they saw the way the snow was coming down, they decided it wasn't such a bad idea after all. So we took it to the party. Ziggy moved it later, to save me from making a complete arse of myself. And that's all there is to it.' He shrugged. 'Honest. We didn't tell you before because we didn't want to waste your time over something and nothing.'

Maclennan glared at him. 'You're wasting my time now.' He opened his file. 'We've got a statement from Helen Walker that you persuaded her to go for a ride in the Land Rover. According to her, you were trying to grab her as you drove. Your driving became so erratic that the Land Rover went into a skid and stalled against a kerb. She jumped out and ran back to the party. She said, and I'm quoting now, "He was out of control." Just how out of control were you, son?'

Weird managed a shaky laugh. 'Look, OK, I was a bit carried away with myself. But there's a big difference between having a bit of fun in a borrowed motor and killing somebody.'

Maclennan gave him a look of contempt. 'That's your idea of a bit of fun, is it? Molesting a woman and frightening her to the point where running through a blizzard in the middle of the night is better than sitting in a car with you?' Weird looked away, sighing. 'You must have been angry. You thought you'd get your way with her but instead she ran away. So what happens next? You see Rosie Duff in the snow, and think you'll work your magic on her? Only she doesn't want to know, she fights you off, but you overpower her. And then you lose it, because you know she can destroy your life.'

Weird jumped to his feet. 'I don't have to sit here and listen to this. You're full of shite. You've got nothing on me and you know it.'

Burnside was on his feet, obstructing Weird's path to the door.

'Not so fast, son,' Maclennan said. 'You're under arrest.'

MACLENNAN GAVE Mondo a long, cool stare. 'Your fingerprints are on the steering wheel of a stolen Land Rover,' he said. 'Care to comment?'

'It wasn't stolen. Just borrowed. Stolen is when you don't plan to give it back, right?' Mondo sounded petulant.

'I'm waiting,' Maclennan said, ignoring the reply.

'I gave somebody a lift home, OK?'

Maclennan leaned forward, a hound with a sniff of prey. 'Who?'

'A girl at the party. She needed to get home to Guardbridge, so I said I'd take her.' Mondo reached inside his jacket and took out a piece of paper. He'd written down the girl's details while he'd been waiting, anticipating just this moment. 'There you go. You can ask her, she'll tell you.'

'What time was this?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know. Two o'clock, maybe?'

'What happened?'

'I drove her home. We had sex. We said good night. So you see, Inspector, I had no reason to be interested in Rosie Duff. I'd just got laid. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself.'

IT DIDN'T FEEL like Christmas Eve. Walking to the bakery for a pie at lunchtime, Barney Maclennan experienced the illusion of having been dropped into a parallel universe. Shop windows blossomed with garish Christmas decorations and the streets were thronged with shoppers staggering under the weight of bulging carrier bags. But it seemed alien to him. Eight days since Rosie Duff's murder, and no prospect of an arrest.

He'd been so confident that the discovery of the Land Rover would support a case against one or more of the students. He thought he'd broken Davey Kerr's story when the lassie in Guardbridge had denied they'd had sex. But Janice Hogg, whom he'd taken with him for the sake of propriety, had been convinced that the girl had been lying, trying to protect her reputation. Right enough, when he'd sent Janice back to re-interview the girl alone, she'd broken down and admitted she had let Kerr have sex with her.

There was no evidence that Alex Gilbey had driven the Land Rover. His fingerprints were all over the interior, but not round the driving seat. That didn't let him off the hook, however. If Gilbey had killed Rosie, he would likely have called for help from the others, and they would probably have given it. Maclennan had a gut feeling about the strength of the bond that united them.

But there was more than instinct at play here. After the frustrating series of interviews, Maclennan had been about to head back for St Andrews when a familiar voice had hailed him across the car park.

Maclennan swung round. 'Robin? That you?'

A slim figure in a police constable's uniform emerged into a pool of light. Robin Maclennan was fifteen years younger than his brother, but the resemblance was striking. 'Did you think you could sneak off without saying hello?'

'They told me you were out on patrol.'

'Just came back. Have a coffee with me before you go. I've got some information I think you'll appreciate.'

Robin turned towards the building and the canteen inside. Maclennan caught up with him by the door.

'What do you mean, information?' he asked.

'Those students you've got in the frame for Rosie Duff's murder. I thought I'd do a wee bit of digging, see what the grapevine had to say.'

'You shouldn't be involving yourself in this, Robin. It's not your case,' Maclennan protested as he followed him down the corridor.

'A murder like this, it's everybody's case.'

'None of them has a record anyway. I've already checked.'

Robin turned as they entered the canteen. 'Look, this is my patch. I can get people to tell me stuff they're not going to give you.'

Maclennan followed his brother to a quiet corner table and waited while Robin fetched the coffees. 'So, what do you know?'

'Your boys are not exactly innocents abroad. When they were thirteen or so, they got caught shoplifting.'

Maclennan shrugged. 'Who didn't shoplift when they were kids?'

'This wasn't just nicking a bar of chocolate or packet of fags. It seems they'd dare each other to nick really difficult things. Just for the hell of it. Nothing they particularly wanted. Everything from secateurs to perfume. It was Kerr who got caught red-handed with a Chinese ginger jar from a grocer. The other three got nabbed standing outside waiting for him. They folded like a bad poker hand as soon as they were brought in. Took us to a shed in Gilbey's garden, where they'd stashed the loot. Everything still in its packaging.'

'What happened?'

'Strings got pulled. Gilbey's old man's a headmaster, Mackie's dad plays golf with the Chief Super. They got off with a caution. That's not all, though. A couple of years later, there was a series of pranks with parked cars. The owners would come back and find graffiti on the inside of their windscreens, written in lipstick. And the cars would all be locked up tight. There was never anything concrete against them, but our local intelligence officer reckons they were behind it. They seem to have a knack for taking the piss.'

Maclennan nodded. He was intrigued by the information about the cars. Maybe the Land Rover hadn't been the only vehicle on the road that night with one of his suspects behind the wheel.

The conversation had slipped into familiar channels—family, football, Christmas—before Maclennan managed to get away. Robin's

information wasn't much but it made Maclennan feel there was a pattern to the activities of the Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy that smacked of a love of risk-taking. It was the sort of behaviour that could easily tip over into something much more dangerous.

Feelings were all very well, but they were worthless without evidence. And evidence was sorely lacking. The Land Rover had turned into a forensic dead end. They'd practically dismantled the interior but nothing had turned up to prove that Rosie Duff had ever been inside it. He couldn't even decide whether to charge Mackie, Kerr and Malkiewicz with taking and driving away. It could just make Fife Police look petty and vindictive.

The one faint hope on the horizon had emerged only a day ago. A householder in Trinity Place had been doing some tidying in his garden when he'd found a sodden bundle of material thrust into his hedge. Mrs Duff had identified it as belonging to Rosie. It had gone to the lab for testing, but Maclennan knew that, in spite of his marking it urgent, nothing would happen now until after the New Year. Just another frustration to add to the list.

4

New Year's Eve, 1978; Kirkcaldy, Scotland

They'd made a pact, back when they were fifteen, that at midnight on New Year's Eve, the four Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy would gather in the Town Square and bring in the New Year together. Every year so far, they'd kept their word. Ziggy would bring his radio to make sure they heard the bells, and they'd pass round whatever drink they'd managed to acquire.

That year, Alex and Ziggy arrived together. Ziggy had called round to the house to collect Alex and they'd walked down to the square. Their conversation kicked off with speculation as to whether Weird would manage to persuade his father to let him off the leash for Hogmanay.

'He's been acting pretty strange lately,' Alex said.

'Gilly, he's always strange. That's why we call him Weird.'

'I know, but he's been different. He's been kind of subdued. He's not had much to say for himself.'

'Probably something to do with his current lack of access to alcohol and substances,' Ziggy said wryly. 'To tell you the truth, I've

hardly spoken to him since the last time Maclennan interviewed us.'

'I've only seen him at work. Soon as we clock off, he's out of there. He won't even come for a coffee with me and Mondo.'

Ziggy pulled a face. 'I'm surprised Mondo's got the time for coffee.'

'Go easy on him. It's his way of dealing with it. When he's getting his end away with some lassie, he can't be thinking about the murder.'

It was ten to twelve when they trotted down the steps that led to the paved area outside the Town House. There were already several groups of people passing bottles from hand to hand. Alex looked round to see if he could spot the others.

'Over there, up at the Post Office end,' Ziggy said. 'Mondo's brought the latest lay. Oh, and Lynn's there with them too.' He pointed to his left, and they set off to join the others.

After the exchange of greetings, Alex found himself standing next to Lynn. She was growing up, he thought. Not a kid any more. With her elfin features and dark curls, she was a feminine version of Mondo. 'So, how's it going?' Alex said. It wasn't much of a line, but he didn't want to be thought to be chatting up fifteen-year-olds.

'Great. You have a good Christmas?'

'Not bad.' He screwed up his face. 'It was hard not to think about . . . you know.'

'I know. I couldn't get her out of my mind either.'

'Let's talk about something else. How are you getting on at school?'

Her face fell. She didn't want to be reminded of the age gap between them, he realised. 'Fine. I've got my O grades this year. I can't wait to get my Highers out of the way so I can start my life properly.'

'Do you know what you're going to do?' Alex asked.

'Edinburgh College of Art. I want to do a Fine Art degree, then go to the Courtauld in London and learn how to be a picture restorer.'

Her confidence was beautiful to behold, he thought. He'd more or less drifted into History of Art, because he'd never had the confidence in his talent as a practitioner. Before he could respond, a shout went up from the others. 'He made it!'

Alex turned round to see Weird, his arms windmilling like a disarticulated scarecrow. As he ran, he let out a whooping cry. Then he was upon them, hugging them, grinning.

'Quiet, everybody,' Ziggy shouted over the hubbub. 'It's the bells.'

A hush fell over them as they strained to hear Big Ben coming from Ziggy's transistor. As the chimes began, the Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy looked at each other. Their arms rose as if drawn by a common thread and they clasped their hands on the final stroke of

twelve. 'Happy New Year,' they chorused. Alex could see his friends were as choked with emotion as he was himself.

Then they broke away from each other and the moment was gone. He turned to Lynn and kissed her chastely on the lips. 'Happy New Year,' he said.

'I think it might be,' she said, a rosy blush on her cheeks.

Ziggy cracked open the bottle of Famous Grouse and it passed from hand to hand. Already the groups in the square were breaking up, everyone mingling and wishing strangers a guid New Year. A few people who knew them from school commiserated with their hard luck at stumbling on a dying girl in the snow. There was no malice in their words, but Alex could see from the eyes of his friends that they hated it as much as he did. A bunch of girls were dancing an impromptu eightsome reel by the Christmas tree. Alex looked round, unable to articulate the emotions swelling in his breast.

Lynn sneaked her hand into his. 'What are you thinking, Alex?'

He looked down at her and forced a tired smile. 'I was just thinking how easy it would be if time froze now. If I never had to see St Andrews again as long as I live.'

'It won't be as bad as you think. You've only got six months to go, and then you'll be free.'

'I could come back at weekends.' The words were out before Alex knew he was going to say them. They both knew what he meant.

'I'd like that,' she said. 'We'll just not mention it to my horrible brother, though.'

Another New Year, another pact.

AT THE POLICE social club in St Andrews, the drink had been flowing for some time. The bells were almost lost in the raucous bonhomie of the Hogmanay dance. Barney Maclennan leaned on the bar, flanked by Iain Shaw and Allan Burnside, each holding a substantial whisky. Here he was on New Year's Eve, mired in the biggest case of his career. And all he was doing was spinning his wheels. Every avenue they'd pursued had turned into a cul-de-sac.

Not a single witness could put Rosie with a man after the beginning of November. They'd tracked down her two previous boyfriends. One had dumped her in favour of the girl he was still going out with. He'd had no axe to grind with the dead barmaid. Rosie had chucked the other in early November. He had a rock-solid alibi for the night in question. He'd been at his office Christmas party, then gone home with his boss's secretary and spent the rest of

the night with her. He admitted he'd been sore about Rosie ending their relationship at the time, but, frankly, was having a lot more fun with a woman who was a bit more generous with her sexual favours.

When pressed by Maclennan as to what he meant by that, he'd admitted they'd never actually had intercourse. They'd played around but she wouldn't go all the way.

Maclennan knew the chances were that the man she'd met that night had also been the man who had taken what he wanted from her and then taken her life. It might have been Alex Gilbey or one of his friends. But it might not.

THREE MILES AWAY in Strathkinness, the New Year arrived in a very different atmosphere. Eileen and Archie Duff sat huddled in their chairs, untouched glasses of whisky at their sides. The television was blank and silent in the corner. The oppressive stillness carried the weight of grief and depression.

In the scullery, slumped on a pair of kitchen chairs, Brian and Colin were having no difficulty drinking the New Year in. Since Rosie's death, they'd found it easy to pour alcohol down their throats till they couldn't find their mouths any longer.

Tonight, the bottle of Bell's was already past the halfway mark. Colin looked at his watch. 'We missed it,' he said.

Brian looked at him blearily. 'Why should I care? Rosie's going to miss it every year.'

'Aye. But somewhere out there, whoever killed her is probably raising a glass to getting away with it.'

'It was them. I'm sure it was them. You see that picture? Did you ever see anybody look more guilty?'

Colin nodded agreement. 'There was nobody else about. And they said she was still breathing. So if it wasn't them, where did the murderer disappear to? He didnae just vanish into thin air.'

'We should make a New Year's resolution.' Brian held up his glass. 'If the cops can't get a confession, then we will.'

Colin raised his glass and chinked it against his brother's.

THE DAY BEFORE they were due to return to St Andrews, the Laddies fi' Kirkcaldy met up in the Harbour Bar for a lunchtime pint. Flush with their Christmas earnings, Alex, Mondo and Weird would have been happy to make a session of it. But Ziggy talked them out into the day. It was crisp and clear, the sun watery in a pale blue sky. They walked out onto the west beach. Weird hung a little behind the other

three, his eyes on the distant horizon as if seeking inspiration.

Halfway along the beach, he joined them. 'I've something to tell you,' he said. 'You're not going to like it, but I hope you can respect it.'

'Come on then, Weird. Let's hear it,' Alex said, trying to sound encouraging.

Weird dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans. 'I've become a Christian,' he said gruffly.

Alex stared at him open-mouthed.

Ziggy roared with laughter. 'Jesus, Weird, I thought it was going to be some terrible revelation. A Christian?'

Weird's jaw took on a stubborn cast. 'It was a revelation. And I've accepted Jesus into my life as my saviour.'

Ziggy was doubled up with mirth. 'This is the funniest thing I've heard in years . . . Oh God, I think I'm going to piss myself.' He leaned against Mondo, who was grinning from ear to ear.

'And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't take the Lord's name in vain,' Weird said.

Ziggy erupted in fresh snorts of laughter. 'What is it they say? There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents? They'll be dancing in the streets of paradise, snagging a sinner like you.'

Weird looked offended. 'I'm not trying to deny I've done bad things in the past. But that's behind me now. I'm born again, and that means the slate is wiped clean.'

'That must have been some blackboard duster,' Mondo said. 'When did this happen?'

'I went to the Watch Night service on Christmas Eve,' Weird said. 'And something just clicked. I realised I wanted to be washed in the blood of the lamb. I wanted to be cleansed.'

'You never said anything on Hogmanay,' Alex said.

'I wanted you to be sober when I told you. It's a big step, giving your life to Christ.'

'I'm sorry,' Ziggy said, composing himself. 'But you're the last person on the planet I expected to say those words.'

'I know,' Weird said. 'But I mean them.'

'We'll still be your pals.' Ziggy tried to keep the smirk off his lips.

'Just so long as you don't try and convert us,' Mondo said.

'Come on,' Ziggy urged. 'I'm freezing, standing here. Let's go.' He set off, Mondo at his side.

Alex fell into step beside Weird. He felt sorry for his friend. It must have been terrible to have experienced a sense of isolation so profound he'd had to turn to the happy-clappies for solace. *I should have*

been there for him, Alex thought with a twinge of guilt. 'It must have felt pretty strange,' he said.

Weird shook his head. 'Just the opposite. I felt at peace. Like I'd finally stopped being a square peg in a round hole and I'd found the place I belonged. I only went to the service to keep my mum company. And I was sitting there in Abbotshall Kirk, the candles flickering all around and Ruby Christie singing "Silent Night" unaccompanied. And all the hairs on my body stood on end and suddenly it all made sense. I understood that God gave His only son for the sins of the world. And that meant me. It meant I could be redeemed.'

'So what did you do?'

'Nothing. I sat through the service and went home. I thought it was just a one-off. Maybe to do with all the stuff that Rosie's death churned up. But when I woke up in the morning, I felt the same. So I looked in the paper to see who had a Christmas Day service and I ended up at an evangelical gig down the Links.'

'I bet you had the place to yourself on Christmas morning.'

Weird laughed. 'Are you kidding? The place was full to the doors. It was brilliant. The people treated me like we'd been friends for years. And after the service, I went and spoke to the minister.' Weird bowed his head. 'It was a pretty emotional encounter. Anyway, the upshot is he baptised me last week. And he's given me the name of a sister congregation in St Andrews.' He gave Alex a beatific smile. 'That's why I needed to tell you guys today. Because I'll be going to church just after we get back to Fife Park tomorrow.'

THE FOLLOWING EVENING Weird packed his guitar into its case and set off to the evangelical service near the harbour. The others sat in the kitchen at Fife Park and watched him stride off into the night.

'I feel bad about this,' Alex said. 'He wouldn't have gone off like this if he hadn't been feeling really shit. I know he seemed to be the most cool of all of us about Rosie's murder, but I think deep down it must have affected him.'

'Maybe there's more to it than that,' Mondo said.

'How do you mean?' Ziggy asked.

Mondo scuffed the toes of his boots against the floor. 'Come on, guys. We don't know what Weird was doing running around in that Land Rover the night Rosie died. We've only got his word for it that he never saw her.'

'You can't think Weird would rape somebody, never mind kill them,' Alex protested.

'He was off his face that night. You can't say what he could or couldn't do when he's in that state,' Mondo said.

'Enough.' Ziggy's voice cut through the atmosphere of mistrust like a blade. 'You start that and where do you stop? I was out there too that night. Alex actually invited Rosie to the party. And come to that, you took a hell of a long time taking that lassie back to Guardbridge. What kept you, Mondo?' He glared at his friend. 'Is that the kind of shit you want to hear, Mondo?'

'I never said anything about you two. There's no call for you to have a go at me.'

'But it's all right for you to have a go at Weird when he's not here to defend himself? Some friend you are.'

'Aye, well, now he's got a friend in Jesus,' Mondo sneered. 'Which is a pretty extreme reaction. Looks like guilt to me.'

'Stop it,' Alex shouted. 'We need to stick together or we're sunk.'

'Alex is right,' Ziggy said. 'I'm going to the late shop to buy milk and bread so we can all have a cup of coffee before those hairy-arsed Tories get back and clutter the place up with their English accents.'

'I'll come down with you. I need to get some fags,' Alex said.

When they returned half an hour later, the world had turned upside-down. The police were back in force, and their two fellow residents were on the doorstep with their luggage, their faces a study in disbelief.

'Evening, Harry. Evening, Eddie,' Ziggy said affably, peering over their shoulders into the hallway where Mondo was being sulky with a WPC. 'Just as well I bought the two pints.'

'What the hell is going on here?' Henry Cavendish demanded. 'Don't tell me that cretin Mackie's been done for drugs.'

'Nothing so prosaic,' Ziggy said, smiling sweetly at Cavendish. 'The police are here because we're murder suspects.'

'What he means to say,' Alex added hastily, 'is that we're witnesses. One of the barmaids from the Lammas Bar was murdered just before Christmas. And we happened to find the body.'

'That's appalling,' Cavendish said. 'I had no idea.' He peered into the house, looking discomfited. 'Look, this is a bad time for you. It's probably easier all round if we find somewhere else to stay for now. Come on, Ed. We can crash with Tony and Simon tonight. We'll see if we can get transferred to another residence in the morning.' He turned away, then looked back, frowning. 'Where's my Land Rover?'

'It's a bit complicated,' Ziggy said. 'See, we borrowed it and . . .'

'You *borrowed* it?' Cavendish sounded outraged.

'I'm sorry. But the weather was terrible.'

'So where is it now?'

Ziggy looked embarrassed. 'You'll need to ask the police about that. The night we borrowed it, that was the night of the murder.'

'I don't believe you people,' Cavendish snarled. 'My Land Rover is part of a murder investigation?'

'Afraid so. Sorry about that.'

Cavendish looked furious. 'You'll be hearing from me about this.'

Alex and Ziggy watched as the other two staggered back down the path with their suitcases. Before they could say more, they had to step aside to let the police leave. There were four uniformed officers and a couple of men in plain clothes. They ignored Alex and Ziggy and headed for their cars.

'What was all that about?' Alex asked when they'd finally made it indoors.

Mondo shrugged. 'They didn't say. They were taking paint samples from the walls and the ceilings and the woodwork,' he said. 'I overheard one of them say something about a cardigan, but they didn't seem to be looking at our clothes. They poked around everywhere, asked if we'd decorated recently.'

Ziggy snorted with laughter. 'As if that's going to happen.'

AT CABERFEIDH COTTAGE, Rosie's family were preparing to lay their daughter to rest. The police had released the body at last.

Strathkinness Parish Church was only a couple of hundred yards away. The family had decided they would walk behind the coffin, keeping Rosie company on her last journey.

The hearse was parked outside the house. The Duffs walked down the path, heads bowed, Eileen leaning heavily on her husband's arm. The family took their places behind the coffin. Behind them, friends and relatives gathered in sombre groupings. Bringing up the rear were the police. Maclennan led the detachment, proud that several of the team had turned up on their time off.

It was a short service. Maclennan found the simple words unbearably poignant. He bowed his head for the prayer, knowing that the service would bring no resolution to anyone who had known Rosie. There would be no peace for any of them until he did his job.

And it was looking less and less likely that he would be able to satisfy their need. The investigation had almost ground to a halt. The only recent forensic evidence had come from the cardigan. All that had yielded were some paint fragments. But none of the samples taken from inside the students' house had come anywhere near a match.

Maclennan found himself coming back again and again to the four students. Their alibis were so flimsy they hardly deserved the name. And there was the shadow of a motive. Gilbey and Kerr had fancied Rosie. Dorothy, one of the other barmaids, had mentioned that when giving her statement. 'The big one that looks a bit like a dark-haired Ryan O'Neal,' she'd put it. 'He fancied her something rotten. And the wee one that looks like him out of T. Rex. He was always mooning after Rosie. Not that she gave him the time of day, mind you. The other one, though, the big one. She said she wouldn't mind a night out with him if he was five years older.'

The thing that made Gilbey look less likely as a suspect was the forensics. The sperm they'd found on Rosie's clothes had been deposited by a secretor, someone whose blood group was present in his other bodily fluids. Their rapist and presumably their killer had blood group O. Alex Gilbey was AB, which meant he hadn't raped her unless he'd used a condom. But Malkiewicz, Kerr and Mackie were all group O. So theoretically, it could have been one of them.

Maclennan was so deep in thought, he was taken aback to find the service over, the congregation shuffling to their feet. He looked around at his team, nodding them outside as the coffin disappeared. His officers gathered behind him, speaking softly among themselves.

Hidden by a corner of the building, Janice Hogg lit a cigarette. She wasn't on duty, after all, and she needed a blast of nicotine after that harrowing. She'd only had a couple of drags when Jimmy Lawson appeared. 'I thought I smelt smoke,' he said. 'Mind if I join you?'

He lit up, leaning against the wall, his hair falling over his forehead and shading his eyes. She thought he'd lost weight recently, and it suited him, hollowing his cheeks and defining his jaw line.

'I wouldn't want to go through that again in a hurry,' he said.

'Me neither. I felt like all those eyes were looking to us for an answer we haven't got.'

'And no sign of getting one either,' Lawson said, his voice bitter.

'It's not like *Starsky and Hutch*, is it?'

'Thank God. I mean, would you want to wear those cardies?'

Janice sniggered, in spite of herself. 'When you put it like that . . .'

Lawson inhaled deeply. 'Janice . . . do you fancy going out for a drink sometime?'

Janice looked at him in astonishment. She'd never imagined for a moment that he had noticed she was a woman except when it came to making tea or breaking bad news. 'Are you asking me out?'

'Looks like it. What do you say?'

'I don't know, Jimmy. I'm not sure if it's a good idea to get involved with somebody in the job.'

'And when do we get the chance to meet anybody else unless we're arresting them? Come on, Janice. Just a wee drink. See how we get on?' His smile gave him a charm she'd never noticed before.

She looked at him, considering. He wasn't exactly a dreamboat, but he wasn't bad looking. He had a reputation for being a bit of a ladies' man but he'd always treated her with courtesy, unlike so many of her colleagues whose contempt was seldom far from the surface.

'OK,' she said.

NONE OF HIS three friends would ever have described Weird as sensible, even before he got God. He'd always been an unstable mixture of cynicism and naiveté. Unfortunately, his new-found spirituality had stripped away the cynicism without providing any complementary access of nous. So when his new friends in Jesus announced that there was no better occasion to evangelise than the evening of Rosie Duff's funeral, Weird had gone along with the suggestion. People would be thinking about their mortality, the reasoning went. This was the best possible time to remind them that Jesus offered the one direct route to the kingdom of heaven.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he stationed himself by the door of the Lammas Bar. In the first ten minutes, he handed out a tract to one of the regulars who gave him a curious stare as he pushed the door open. Seconds later, the door swung back violently. Brian and Colin Duff hurtled into the street, followed by a couple of other young men. They were all red in the face and fuelled by drink.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?' Brian roared, grabbing Weird. He pushed him back against the wall hard.

'You wee shite,' Colin shouted. 'We buried my sister today, thanks to you and your vicious wee pals. And you've got the nerve to turn up here preaching about Jesus?'

'Call yourself a fucking Christian? You killed my sister.' Brian was banging him rhythmically against the wall. Weird tried to force his hands away, but the other man was far stronger.

'I never touched her,' Weird howled. 'It wasnae us.'

'Well, who the fuck was it? Youse were the only ones there,' Brian raged. He raised his fist. 'Let's see how you like it.' He smashed a right hook into Weird's jaw and followed it with a crushing left to his face. Weird's knees gave way. It was only the beginning.

Suddenly feet and fists were flying, thumping into his body. Blood,

tears and mucus streamed down his face. 'Jesus, Jesus,' he sobbed.

'He's not going to help you now, you big streak of piss,' somebody shouted.

Then, blessedly, it stopped. 'What's going on here?' he heard a woman say. He lifted his head out of the foetal crouch he'd adopted. A WPC was standing over him. Behind her, he could see the constable Alex had fetched the night they found Rosie Duff. His assailants stood around, sullen, hands in their pockets.

'Just a bit of fun,' Brian Duff said.

'Doesn't look very funny to me, Brian. Lucky the landlord had the good sense to call this one in,' the woman said, peering at Weird's face. He pushed himself into a sitting position and coughed up a mouthful of snot and blood. 'You're Tom Mackie, aren't you?' she said.

'Aye,' he groaned.

'I'll radio for an ambulance,' she said.

'No,' Weird said, tottering upright. 'I'll be fine. I live with a medical student.' Speaking, he discovered, took an effort. It felt like he'd had a jaw transplant that he hadn't learned how to work yet.

'We'll give you a lift home in the patrol car,' the woman said. 'I'm Constable Hogg, and this is Constable Lawson. Jimmy, keep an eye on him, will you? I need to have a word with these morons. Colin, Brian? Over here. You others? Make yourselves scarce.' She led Colin and Brian to one side.

'What was that about?' she demanded. 'Look at the state of him.'

Brian gave a drunken sneer. 'Less than he deserves. You know what it was about. We're doing your job for you because you're so useless you couldn't detect your way out of a paper bag.'

'Shut up, Brian,' Colin urged. He had always had more of an instinct for staying out of trouble than his brother. 'Look, we're sorry, OK? Things just got a bit out of hand.'

'I'll say. You've half killed him.'

'Aye, well, him and his pals didnae leave the job half done when they started it,' Brian said pugnaciously.

'You've got it wrong, Brian. They're witnesses, not suspects,' Janice said wearily. 'I told you that the night it happened.'

'You're the only ones round here that think that,' Brian said.

Colin turned to Janice. 'You arresting us, or what?'

Janice sighed. 'I know you buried Rosie today. I was there. For your parents' sake, I'm willing to turn a blind eye. I don't think Mr Mackie will want to press charges.' As Colin went to speak, she held up a cautionary finger. 'This only works provided you and Cassius

Clay here keep your hands to yourself. Leave this to us, Colin.'

He nodded. 'OK, Janice.'

Brian looked astonished. 'When did you start calling her Janice? She's not on our side, you know.'

'Shut the fuck up, Brian,' Colin said. 'I apologise for my brother. He's had a wee bit too much to drink.'

'Don't worry about it. But you're not stupid, Colin. You know I meant what I said. Mackie and his pals are off limits. Is that clear?'

Brian sniggered. 'I think she fancies you, Colin.'

The idea clearly tickled the drunk part of Colin's brain. 'Is that right? What do you say, Janice? Why don't you keep me on the straight and narrow? You fancy a night out? I'll show you a good time.'

Janice caught a movement out of the corner of her eye, and glanced round in time to see Jimmy Lawson draw his truncheon and move towards Colin Duff. She raised a hand to ward him off, but the threat was enough to leave Duff backing away.

'Hey,' he protested.

'Wash your mouth out, you sad sack of shite,' Lawson said. His face was set and angry. 'Don't you ever, ever speak to a police officer like that. Now get out of our sight before I get Constable Hogg to change her mind about locking you two up for a very long time.' He spoke savagely, his lips tight against his teeth.

Colin grabbed Brian's arm. 'Come on. We've got a pint waiting for us inside.' He led his leering brother away.

Janice turned to Lawson. 'There was no call for that, Jimmy.'

'No call for it? He was making a pass at you. He's not fit to shine your shoes.' His voice was thick with contempt.

'I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Jimmy. I've dealt with a lot worse than Colin Duff. Now, let's get this lad home.'

Between them, they helped Weird to their car and eased him into the back seat. As Lawson walked round to the driver's door, Janice spoke. 'And, Jimmy . . . About that drink? I think I'll pass.'

Lawson gave her a long, hard stare. 'Please yourself.'

They drove back to Fife Park in stony silence. They helped Weird to the front door then headed back to the car.

'Look, Janice, I'm sorry if you thought I came on too heavy back there,' Lawson said. 'But Duff was well out of line. You can't talk to a police officer like that.'

Janice leaned on the roof of the car. 'He was out of line. But you didn't react like that because he was insulting the uniform. You drew your truncheon because you'd decided I was your property just

because I agreed to go out for a drink with you. And he was stepping on your territory. I'm sorry, Jimmy, I don't need that in my life.'

Lawson shrugged, petulant. 'Your loss. It's not like I'm stuck for female company.'

ANY HOPES they'd had of Rosie's death being a nine-day wonder were dashed by the newspaper coverage of the funeral. It was all over the front pages again, and anyone in the town who had missed the initial coverage would have been hard pressed to avoid the reprise.

It was Alex who was the first victim. Walking home from the supermarket a couple of days later, he was taking a short cut along the bottom of the Botanic Gardens when Henry Cavendish and his chums ran up, dressed for rugby training. As soon as they spotted Alex, they started catcalling, then surrounded him, pushing and shoving. They dragged him to the grass verge and threw him to the slushy ground. Alex rolled around, trying to escape the prodding of their boots. A stray foot caught his nose and he felt blood spurt.

'Fuck off,' he shouted, wiping mud and blood from his face.

'You're the ones who should fuck off, killer boy,' Cavendish shouted. 'You're not wanted here.'

A quiet voice interjected. 'And what makes you think you are?'

Alex saw Jimmy Lawson standing on the fringe of the group. It took him a moment to recognise him out of uniform.

'Push off,' Ed Greenhalgh said. 'This is none of your business.'

Lawson reached inside his anorak and pulled out his warrant card. He flipped it open and said, 'I believe you'll find it is, sir.'

Alex got to his feet, sodden and filthy, contemplating the wreckage of the shopping. A bottle of milk had erupted over his trousers, a burst jar of lemon curd was smeared down his parka.

Lawson dismissed Alex's tormentors and stood looking at him, a smile on his face. 'Lucky for you I was passing,' he said.

'You're not working?' Alex said.

'No. I live round the corner. I just popped out to catch the post. Come on, come back to my place, we'll get you cleaned up.'

'That's very kind of you, but there's no need.'

Lawson grinned. 'You can't walk the streets of St Andrews looking like that. Besides, you're shivering. You need a cup of tea.'

Alex wasn't going to argue. The temperature was freezing and he didn't fancy walking home soaking wet. 'Thanks,' he said.

They turned into a street so new it didn't have pavements. The first few plots were completed, but after that, they petered into building

sites. Lawson carried on past the finished homes and stopped by a caravan parked on what would one day be a front garden. Behind it Alex could see four walls and roof timbers covered in tarpaulin.

'I'm doing a self-build,' Lawson said, unlocking the door of the caravan. 'That way, I get a chief superintendent's house on a constable's salary.' He climbed into the caravan. 'But for now, I live here.'

Alex followed. The caravan was cosy, a gas heater blasting warmth into the confined space. He was impressed by its neatness. The chrome gleamed. The paintwork was clean and fresh. The only sign of habitation was a pan simmering on the stove. The smell of lentil soup went round Alex's heart. 'Very nice,' he said, taking it all in.

'It's a bit cramped, but if you keep it tidy, it doesn't get claustrophobic. Take your jacket off; we'll hang it over the heater. You'll need to wash your face and hands—that's the toilet, past the cooker.'

Alex let himself into the tiny cubicle. He looked in the mirror above the sink. God, he was a mess. Dried blood, mud. And lemon curd spiking his hair. He ran a basin of water and scrubbed himself clean. When he emerged, Lawson was leaning against the stove.

'That's better. Sit near the heater; you'll soon dry off. Now, a cup of tea? Or I've got homemade lentil soup if you fancy that.'

'Soup would be great.'

Alex did as he was told while Lawson ladled out a steaming bowl of soup. He put it in front of Alex and handed him a spoon.

'I don't mean to sound rude, but why are you being so nice to me?' Alex asked.

'Because I feel sorry for you and your pals. All you did was act like responsible citizens, but you've been made to look like the bad guys. And I suppose I feel partly responsible. If I'd been out on patrol instead of sitting tucked up in my car, I'd maybe have caught the guy red-handed.'

'Does Maclennan still think it might have been us?' Alex asked.

'I don't know what he thinks, son. I'll be honest with you. We're stuck. And so you four have ended up in the firing line.' Lawson sat down opposite him and lit a cigarette. 'You and your pals go back a long way?' he asked.

'We've been best mates ever since our first day at high school.'

'Everybody needs their pals. It's like this job. You work with the same people over a period of time, they're like brothers. You'd lay down your life for them if you had to.'

'I know what you mean. It's the same for us.' *Or it used to be*, Alex thought with a pang. This term, things were different. Weird was off

with the God Squad more often than not. And God alone knew where Mondo was half the time. The Duffs weren't the only ones paying an emotional price for Rosie's death, he suddenly realised.

'So you'd lie for each other if you thought you had to?'

The spoon stopped halfway to Alex's mouth. So that was what this was about. He pushed the bowl away and stood up, reaching for his jacket. 'Thanks for the soup,' he said. 'I'm fine now.'

ZIGGY SELDOM FELT LONELY. An only child, he was accustomed to his own company. But tonight, loneliness had seeped into the little house on Fife Park. He had plenty of work to keep him busy, but for once Ziggy craved company. Weird was off with his guitar, learning how to praise the Lord in three chords. Alex had come home in a foul mood after a rumble with Cavendish and his friends. He'd got changed then gone off to some slide lecture on Venetian painters. And Mondo was out somewhere, probably getting laid.

Now that was an idea. Ziggy hankered after something more than the anonymous encounters with strangers that were his only experience of sex. He wanted a boyfriend, a lover, a partner. But he had no idea how to find one. For now, the only outlet for his feelings was the casual encounter.

As far as he knew, there were no pubs in St Andrews where he was likely to find what he was looking for. But there were a couple of places where gay men hung out.

Ziggy pulled on his sheepskin jacket and walked out into the freezing night. A fifteen-minute walk brought him to the back of the ruined cathedral. He crossed over to The Scores, making for what remained of St Mary's Church. In the shadow of the broken walls, men often lurked, trying to look as if they were out for an evening stroll that encompassed a bit of architectural heritage.

DOWN BY THE HARBOUR, Brian Duff was drinking with his cronies. They were bored. 'This is no fun,' his best pal Donny complained. 'And we're too skint to go somewhere you can get a decent night out.'

Then Kenny had his brainwave. 'I ken what we can do. Let's go and mug a few nancy boys.'

'You're talking about going and robbing people?' Donny said.

Kenny shrugged. 'They're poofs. They don't count. And they're not going to go running to the polis, are they? They'd have to explain what they were doing hanging about St Mary's Church in the dark.'

They lurched out into the night, guffawing. It was a short walk to

the church ruins. A half-moon peeped out from fitful clouds, lighting their way. As they approached they fell silent, prowling on the balls of their feet. They crept up the side of the building and through the remains of a doorway. And there, in an alcove, they found what they were looking for.

5

Ziggy had never been so scared. He stumbled to his feet and backed away. But Brian was on him, hand grabbing at the lapel of the sheepskin. Donny and Kenny stood uncertain as the other man zipped himself up and took to his heels.

'Brian, you want us to go after the other one?' Kenny said.

'No, this is perfect. You know who this creepy little fairy is? He's one of the bastards that killed Rosie.'

'We didn't kill Rosie,' Ziggy said. 'I tried to save her.'

'Aye, after you'd raped and stabbed her first. Were you trying to prove to your mates that you were a real man and not a poof?' Brian shouted. 'Well, son, it's confession time. You're going to tell me the truth about what happened to my sister.'

'I'm telling you the truth. We never harmed a hair on her head.'

'I don't believe you. And I'm going to make you tell the truth. I know the very thing.' Without taking his eyes off Ziggy, he said, 'Kenny, away down the harbour and get me a rope.'

'I didn't kill your sister,' Ziggy said. 'I know the cops have warned you to leave us alone. Don't think I'm not going to report this.'

Brian laughed. 'You're not going to tell anybody about this. Because then they'd all know what you were up to.'

'I don't care,' Ziggy said. 'I'll take my chances. Do you really want another load of grief dumped on your mother's doorstep?'

As soon as the words were out, Ziggy knew he'd miscalculated. Brian slapped him so hard he heard the vertebrae in his neck crack.

'Don't you mention my mother. She never knew grief before you bastards killed my sister.' Brian slapped him again. 'Admit it. You know you're going to have to pay sooner or later.'

'I'm not admitting something I didn't do,' Ziggy choked out.

Brian gut-punched him with all his strength. Ziggy folded, staggering. Vomit cascaded to the ground. Gasping for breath, he felt the

rough stone at his back, the only thing that was holding him upright.

'Tell me,' Brian hissed.

Ziggy closed his eyes. 'Nothing to tell,' he squeezed out.

By the time Kenny returned, he'd taken a few more blows. Blood covered his chin from a split lip, and his kidneys were sending sharp stabs of agony through his body.

Brian yanked Ziggy's hands in front of him. 'Tie one end round his wrists,' he ordered Kenny.

'What are you going to do to me?' Ziggy asked.

Brian grinned. 'Make you talk.'

When Kenny had finished, Brian took the rope. He wound a loop round Ziggy's waist, tying it tightly. Now his hands were held firm against his body. Brian yanked on the rope. Ziggy dug his heels in, but Donny grabbed the rope with Brian and yanked so hard they nearly pulled him off his feet. 'Kenny, check it's all clear.'

Kenny ran ahead to the archway. He looked up The Scores. There was no sign of life. 'Nobody around, Bri,' he called softly.

Hauling on the rope, Brian and Donny set off. They trotted up the street, Ziggy desperately trying to keep his balance while tugging at his hands to see if he could free himself. What the hell were they going to do to him?

The ground under his feet fell away without warning and Ziggy tumbled to meet it, rolling over and crashing into Brian and Donny's legs. A storm of swearing, then he was pulled roughly to his feet and shoved face first into a wall. Ziggy slowly orientated himself. They were standing on the path that ran alongside the wall surrounding the remains of Ravenscraig Castle. They clambered up the grassy slope towards the low stub of the east wall. Ziggy stumbled and fell a few times, but hands hauled him upright.

'Me and my brother used to love coming here when we were kids,' Brian said as he slowed to a stroll. They were now at the entrance to the Sea Tower. 'There are two vaulted chambers in the lower storey,' he continued conversationally, leading the way inside. 'The eastern one contains something interesting. Do you know what that is?'

Ziggy stood mute. But Kenny answered the question for him. 'You're not going to put him down the Bottle Dungeon?'

Brian grinned. 'Well done, Kenny.' He reached into his pocket and produced a cigarette lighter. 'Donny, give me your paper.'

Donny produced a copy of the *Evening Telegraph* from his inside pocket. Brian rolled it tightly and lit one end of it as he walked into the eastern chamber. By the flare of the makeshift torch, Ziggy could

see a hole in the floor covered with a heavy iron grille. 'They cut a hole in the rock in the shape of a bottle. It's a long way down.'

Donny and Kenny looked at each other. This was growing a bit too serious for their taste. 'Hang on, Brian,' Kenny protested.

'What? You're the ones that said poofters don't count. Come on, give me a hand.' He tied the end of Ziggy's rope to the grille. 'It'll take the three of us to get this off.'

They gripped the grille, hunkering down to the task. Eventually, with a harsh grating of metal on stone, it shifted. They moved it to one side and turned as one to Ziggy.

'You got anything to say to me?' Brian Duff demanded.

'I didn't kill your sister,' Ziggy said, desperate now. 'Do you really think you can get away with dropping me down a fucking dungeon and leaving me to die?'

'The castle's open at the weekends in the winter. That's only a couple of days away. You willnae die. Well, probably not, anyway.' He dug Donny in the ribs and laughed. 'OK, boys, bombs away.'

They manhandled Ziggy towards the narrow opening. In seconds, he was sitting on the edge of the circular hole, legs dangling into space.

'Don't do this,' he said. 'Please, don't do this.' He sniffed, trying not to give way to the tears that choked his throat. 'I'm begging you.'

'Just tell me the truth,' Brian said. 'It's your last chance.'

'I never,' Ziggy sobbed. 'I never.'

Brian kicked the small of his back, sending him hurtling down for a few feet, his shoulders bouncing painfully against the stone walls of the narrow funnel. He jerked to a halt, the rope biting cruelly into his stomach. Then he was moving again, the rope lowering him in short spurts. Every foot took him further into darkness, the faint flickers from above fading in the dank, freezing air.

Eventually, he felt a difference in the quality of the air and he stopped bumping the sides. The bottle was widening from the neck.

His toes scraped solid ground and blessedly took the strain off the rope biting into his gut. The rope above him slackened. A voice echoed from above. 'Last chance. Confess and we'll pull you out.'

It would have been so easy. But it would have been a lie that would lead him into impossible places. Even to save himself, Ziggy couldn't name himself a murderer. 'You're wrong,' he shouted.

The rope landed on his head, its whipping coils surprisingly heavy. He heard a last jeering laugh, then silence. The glimmer of light from the top of the shaft died. He was immured in blackness. No matter how hard he strained his eyes, he could see nothing at all.

ALEX WAS SURPRISED to find the house empty when he arrived home. Ziggy hadn't said anything about going out and Alex presumed he'd planned an evening working. Maybe he had gone round to see one of his fellow medics. Not that Alex was worried. Just because he'd been rousted by Cavendish and his crew was no reason to believe anything bad had happened to Ziggy.

He made himself a cup of coffee and a pile of toast, then sat at the kitchen table, his lecture notes in front of him. He was scribbling in the margin when Weird came in, followed by Mondo.

'Where's Zig? Is he working?' Weird asked.

'He's out. Don't know where. If you're putting the kettle on, Mondo, I'll have another coffee.'

ZIGGY WOULD HAVE given all he possessed to be anywhere else. It seemed like hours since he'd been dumped in the dungeon. He was chilled to the bone. He'd finally managed to untie his hands. His fingers felt as swollen and cold as supermarket sausages. He thrust them inside his jacket, into his armpits. Axillae, he thought, remembering that cold was an enemy of thought, slowing the brain down.

That was how to stay alive. Memory and movement. He started jogging on the spot. A minute jogging, two minutes resting. Which would be fine if he could see his watch, he thought stupidly. For once, he wished he smoked. Then he'd have matches, a lighter. Something to breach this appalling blank darkness. 'Sensory deprivation,' he said aloud. 'Break the silence. Talk to yourself. Sing.'

He thought about all the afternoons he'd spent hating PE. Sadistic gym teachers and endless circuit training, cross country and rugby. Movement and memory.

He was going to make it out alive. Wasn't he?

MORNING CAME, and no Ziggy in the kitchen. Concerned, Alex stuck his head round Ziggy's door. No Ziggy. It was hard to tell whether his bed had been slept in, since Alex doubted he'd made it since the beginning of term. He returned to the kitchen, where Mondo was tucking into a bowl of Coco Pops.

'I'm worried about Ziggy. I don't think he came back last night.'

'You're such an old woman, Gilly. Did you ever consider he might have got laid?'

'Mondo, how long have we been sharing a house?'

'Three and a half years,' Mondo said, eyes to the ceiling.

'And how many nights has Ziggy stayed out?'

'I don't know, Gilly. In case you hadn't noticed, I tend to be away from base quite a lot myself.'

'As far as I'm aware, Ziggy has never stayed out all night. And it's not that long since Weird had the crap beaten out of him by the Duff brothers. And yesterday I got into a ruck with Cavendish and his cronies. What if he got into a fight? What if he's in the hospital?'

'And what if he got laid? Listen to yourself, Gilly, you sound like my mother.'

'Up yours, Mondo.' Alex grabbed his jacket from the hall and slammed the door on the way out.

He walked across to the phones in the admin building and dialled the police station. He was put through to Maclennan. 'It's Alex Gilbey, Inspector,' he said. 'I know this is probably going to sound like a waste of your time, but I'm worried about Ziggy Malkiewicz. He didn't come home last night, which he's never done before . . .'

'And after what happened to Mr Mackie, you felt a bit uneasy?' Maclennan finished.

'That's right.'

'Are you at Fife Park now?'

'Aye.'

'Stay put. I'm coming over.'

Alex trudged back to the house and told Mondo to expect the police. By the time Maclennan arrived, Weird had joined them.

Maclennan took Alex through the events of the previous evening. 'And you've no idea where he might have gone?'

Alex shook his head. 'He didn't say he was going out.'

Maclennan gave Alex a shrewd look. 'Does he go in for cottaging, do you know?'

Mondo glared at Maclennan. 'You calling my pal a queer?'

Weird looked baffled. 'What's cottaging?'

Mondo rounded on Weird. 'Cottaging is what poofs do. Picking up strangers in toilets and having sex with them.' He gestured at Maclennan. 'For some reason, the plod thinks Ziggy's a poof.'

'Mondo, shut up,' Alex said. 'We'll talk about this later.'

Maclennan's radio crackled into life and he moved into the hall to answer it. His words drifted back into the kitchen. 'The castle? You're kidding . . . Actually, I've got an idea who it might be. Get the Fire Brigade in. I'll see you down there.'

He came back in. 'I think he might have turned up. We've had a report from one of the guides at the castle. He checks the place every morning. He rang to say there's somebody in the Bottle Dungeon.'

'The Bottle Dungeon?' all three of them chorused.

'It's a chamber under one of the towers. Shaped like a bottle. Once you're in, you can't get out. I need to go over there and see what's what. I'll have somebody let you know what's going on.'

'No. We're coming too,' Alex insisted. 'If he's been stuck in there all night, he deserves to see a friendly face.'

'Sorry, lads. No can do. If you want to make your own way over there, I'll leave word that you're to be let in. But I don't want you cluttering up a rescue operation.' And he was gone.

The moment the door closed, Mondo laid into Alex. 'What the hell was all that about? Shutting us up like that? Cottaging?'

Alex looked away. 'Ziggy's gay,' he said.

Weird looked incredulous. 'No, he's not. How can he be gay? We're his best friends, we'd know.'

'I know,' Alex said. 'He told me a couple of years ago.'

'Great,' Mondo said. 'Thanks for sharing that with us, Gilly. So much for, "All for one and one for all." It's all right for you to know, but we haven't got the right to be told our best mate is a poof.'

Alex stared Mondo down. 'Well, from your tolerant and relaxed reaction, I'd say Ziggy made the right judgment call.'

'You must have got it wrong,' Weird insisted. 'Ziggy's not gay. He's normal. Gays are sick. They're an abomination. Ziggy's not like that.'

Suddenly, Alex had had enough. He snatched up his jacket. 'Shut up, the pair of you. I'm going to the castle. And I don't want to see you two there unless you've got your fucking acts together.'

WHEN ALEX ARRIVED at the castle, two police cars, a fire engine and an ambulance sat outside. The sight of the ambulance made his heart pound. What had happened to Ziggy? One of the firemen pointed him across the grassy courtyard to the Sea Tower, where he found a scene of calm efficiency. The fire officers had set up a generator to run powerful arc lights and a winch. A rope led down into the hole in the middle of the floor. Alex shivered at the sight.

'It's Ziggy, right enough,' Maclennan said. 'The fireman's just gone down in a sort of hoist.'

'What happened?'

Maclennan shrugged. 'We don't know yet.'

As he spoke, the fireman on the winch pressed a button and the machinery howled into action. The rope coiled on a drum, inch by tantalising inch. Then Ziggy's familiar head rose into sight.

He looked a mess. His face was streaked with blood and dirt. One

eye was swollen and bruised, his lip split and crusted. He was blinking at the lights, but as soon as his sight cleared and he saw Alex, he managed a smile. 'Hey, Gilly,' he said. 'Nice of you to stop by.'

As his torso cleared the funnel, willing hands pulled him clear, helping him out of the sling. Ziggy staggered, disorientated and exhausted. Alex rushed forward and took his friend in his arms.

'You're OK,' Alex said, holding him close. 'You're OK now.'

Ziggy hung on to him as if his life depended on it. 'I was afraid I was going to die there,' he whispered. 'I couldn't let myself think like that, but I was so afraid I was going to die.'

MACLENNAN STORMED out of the hospital. When he got to the car, he wrenched open the passenger door and threw himself into it. Janice Hogg, who was in the driver's seat, looked a question at him.

'Malkiewicz says it was a prank that went too far. He doesn't want to make a statement, he doesn't know who did it.'

'Brian Duff,' Janice said decisively.

'On what basis?'

'While you were inside I made a few inquiries. Duff and his two buddies were drinking down at the harbour last night. Just down the road from the castle. They took off at about half past nine. According to the landlord, they looked like they were up to something.'

'Well done, Janice. But it's still a bit thin.'

'Why do you think Malkiewicz won't give a statement? You think he's frightened of reprisals?'

Maclennan sighed. 'Not the kind you're thinking of. I think he was cottaging near the church. He's scared that if he gives us Duff and his pals, they'll stand up in court and tell the world he's a poof. He wants to be a doctor. He's not going to take any chances with that. God, I hate this case. Everywhere I turn, it ends up going nowhere.'

'You could always lean on Duff, sir.'

'And say what?'

'I don't know, sir. But it might make you feel better.'

Maclennan grinned at Janice. 'You're right. Let's go to Guardbridge. I've not been to the paper mill in a long time.'

BRIAN DUFF strode into the manager's office and leaned against the wall. 'I don't like being interrupted at my work,' he said.

'Shut your puss, Brian,' Maclennan said contemptuously.

'That's no way to speak to a member of the public, Inspector.'

'I'm not speaking to a member of the public, I'm speaking to a

piece of shite. I know what you and your pals did last night, Brian. And I know you think you'll get away with it because of what you know about Ziggy Malkiewicz. Well, I'm here to tell you different.' He moved closer to Duff, only inches away from him now. 'From now on, Brian, you and your brother are marked men. You so much as breathe on any of those four lads and you're under arrest. And with your record, that means you're going away again. And this time, it'll be for a damn sight more than three months.'

'That's police harassment,' Brian said.

'No, it's not.' In a sudden, lightning movement, Maclennan's hand shot out and grabbed Duff's crotch. He squeezed as tightly as he could, then twisted his wrist sharply.

Duff screamed. Maclennan let him go and stepped back smartly. Duff doubled over, spitting curses. 'That's police harassment, Brian. Get used to it.' Maclennan yanked open the door. 'Oh dear. Brian seems to have banged into the desk and hurt himself,' he said to the startled secretary in the anteroom. He smiled as he walked past her, out of the door and into the cold sunlight. He got into the car.

'You were right, Janice. I feel a lot better now,' he said.

NO WORK was being done in the small house in Fife Park that day. Mondo and Weird mooched around, and Alex lay on his bed, trying to work out his feelings about what had happened to them all.

He heard the front door opening, and he was down the stairs in seconds. Ziggy leaned against the wall, a wobbly smile on his face.

'Shouldn't you be in the hospital?' Alex asked.

'They wanted to keep me in for observation. But I can do my own obs. There's no need for me to be cluttering up a bed.'

Alex helped him through to the kitchen and put the kettle on. 'I thought you had hypothermia?'

'Only mildly. I've not got any broken bones, just bruises. I'd rather suffer in my own bed than have doctors and nurses poking at me, making jokes about medics who can't heal themselves.'

Footsteps on the stairs, then Mondo and Weird appeared in the doorway, looking sheepish.

'Good to see you, man,' Weird said.

'Aye,' Mondo agreed. 'What the hell happened?'

'They know, Ziggy,' Alex cut in.

'You told them?' The accusation seemed tired rather than angry.

'Maclennan told us,' Mondo said sharply. 'He just confirmed it.'

'Fine,' Ziggy said. 'I don't expect Duff and his Neanderthal buddies

were looking for me in particular. I think they'd just gone out for a bit of queer-bashing and they happened to come across me and this other guy down by St Mary's Church.'

'You were having sex with a total stranger out in the open on a freezing winter night?' Mondo sounded appalled.

Ziggy gave him a long look. 'Would you rather I'd brought him back here?' Mondo said nothing. 'No, I thought not. Unlike the stream of strange women you inflict on us on a regular basis.'

'That's different,' Mondo said, shifting from one foot to the other.

'Why?'

'Well, it's not illegal, for a start,' he said.

'Thanks for your support, Mondo.' Ziggy got to his feet, slowly and precariously, like an old man. 'I'm going to bed.'

A COUPLE OF WEEKS passed in what appeared to be an uneasy truce. Weird spent most of his time either working in the library or with his evangelical friends. Ziggy seemed to recover his sang-froid as his physical injuries healed, but Alex noticed he didn't like being out after dark alone. Alex got his head down to work, but made sure he was around when Ziggy needed company. He went to Kirkcaldy for a weekend, taking Lynn to Edinburgh. They ate in a cheery Italian restaurant and went to the pictures. They walked from the station to her home three miles away. As they cut through the stand of trees that masked the Dunnikier Estate from the main road, she pulled him into the shadows and kissed him as if her life depended on it. He walked home singing.

The person most affected by the recent events, paradoxically, seemed to be Mondo. The story of Ziggy's attack spread round the university like wildfire. The version that went public conveniently left out the first part of the story, so his privacy remained intact. But a sizable majority were talking about the four of them as if they were suspects. They had become pariahs.

Mondo's girlfriend dumped him. She was worried for her reputation, she said. He didn't find a new one easy to come by either. His fellow students on his French course also made it clear they didn't want him around. He was isolated in a way that none of the others was. Weird had the Christians. Ziggy's fellow medics were firmly on his side. Alex didn't give a shit what anyone else thought; he had Ziggy and, though Mondo didn't know it, he had Lynn.

Mondo had wondered if he still had an ace up his sleeve, but it wasn't easy to waylay the person he needed to talk to, and so far he'd

failed to make contact. He couldn't even manage to set up an exercise in mutual self-interest. Because that's what he'd persuaded himself it was. Not blackmail. Just a little reciprocity. But even that was beyond him now. He really was a total failure. The world had been his oyster and now all Mondo could taste was the grit.

He'd always been the most emotionally fragile of the quartet, and without their support, he crumbled. Depression set in like a heavy blanket, muffling the world outside. He couldn't work, couldn't sleep. He stopped showering and shaving, only changing his clothes occasionally. He spent endless hours lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling and listening to Pink Floyd tapes.

Ziggy tried to talk to him, but Mondo would have none of it. Somewhere in his heart, he blamed Ziggy, Weird and Alex for what had happened to him.

One afternoon, he decided he'd had enough. He couldn't take another day of misery and pointlessness. He had no friends, women despised him and he knew he was going to fail his finals because he hadn't done any work. Nobody cared because nobody understood.

Drunk and depressed, he staggered along The Scores towards the castle. He climbed over the railing by the footpath and stood swaying at the edge of the cliff. Below, the sea pounded angrily against the rocks, sending fountains of spume high into the air. Mondo felt at peace as he stared down at the raging water. He spread his arms wide, raised his face to the rain and screamed his pain at the sky.

MACLENNAN WAS WALKING past the radio room when the call went out. Potential suicide on the cliffs above the Castle Sands. Not really a CID matter but he stuck his head in the door.

'Tell them I'm on my way,' he said.

The operator gave him the thumbs up. Maclennan carried on to the car park. God, but it was a rough afternoon. The bloody weather alone was enough to make you suicidal. He drove to the scene, his wipers barely slapping the windscreen clear between gouts of rain. A panda car was already there when he arrived. Two uniformed officers were standing uncertainly by the low railing, watching a young man lean into the wind, his arms spread like Christ on the cross.

'Don't just stand there,' Maclennan said. 'There's a life belt further along. One with a rope. Get it.'

As one of the constables sprinted off, Maclennan climbed over the railing and took a step forward. 'All right, son,' he said gently.

The young man turned and Maclennan realised that it was Davey

Kerr. 'You're too late,' he slurred, his body wavering drunkenly.

'It's never too late,' the detective said. 'Whatever's wrong, we can fix it.'

Mondo turned to face him, and dropped his arms to his side. 'No closer. You stay back. This is my business. Not yours.'

'Think about what you're doing here, Davey. Think about the people who love you. This is going to tear up your family.'

Mondo shook his head. 'They don't care about me. Nobody understands what I'm going through.'

'Let me understand.' Maclennan edged forward. Mondo tried to step sideways but his drunken feet slithered on the wet grass. For a few drawn-out seconds he struggled against the pull of gravity. Then his feet went from under him and he disappeared from sight.

Maclennan lunged forward, but too late. He looked down. He thought he saw the splash. Then he saw Mondo's face through a break in the froth of water. He whirled round as the other constable reached his side. Another police car drew up, disgorging Jimmy Lawson and other uniformed officers.

'The life belt,' Maclennan shouted. 'Hold on to the rope.' Already, he was tearing off his coat and jacket, slipping out of his shoes. Maclennan grabbed the life belt and looked down again. He took a deep breath and launched himself into space.

Hitting the water knocked the breath from him. Gasping and swallowing mouthfuls of freezing water, Maclennan struggled to the surface. In a trough between the waves, he caught a glimpse of Mondo. Maclennan struck out towards him, hampered by the life belt round his arm. The sea lifted him and brought him crashing down, carrying him right into Mondo. He grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

Mondo flailed in his grip. At first, Maclennan thought he was determined to break free and drown himself. But then he understood that Mondo was fighting him for the life belt. Maclennan knew he couldn't hang on indefinitely. He let go of the life belt but managed to cling on to Mondo.

Mondo grabbed at the belt. He thrust one arm through it and tried to get it over his head. But Maclennan was still gripping his collar, knowing his life depended on it. Mondo thrust back as hard as he could with his free elbow. Suddenly, he was clear.

He pulled the life belt over his body. Behind him, Maclennan struggled closer, managing to get a hand on the rope attached to the belt. It took a superhuman effort, his waterlogged clothes fighting him every inch of the way. Cold was eating into Maclennan now, numbing

his fingers. He clung to the rope with one arm, waving the other above their heads to signal to the team on the cliff to bring them up.

He could feel the pull on the rope. They closed in on the cliffs. One minute, Maclennan was aware of the buoyancy of the water. Then all he felt was drag as he rose out of the water, holding on to the life belt and Mondo for dear life.

They were six feet up the cliff when Mondo, terrified that Maclennan was going to pull him back into the maelstrom, kicked backwards. Maclennan's fingers gave up the fight. He plunged back into the water. Again he went under, again he struggled to the surface. He could see Mondo rising slowly up the cliff face. He couldn't believe it. The bastard had kicked him free to save himself. He hadn't been trying to kill himself at all. It had just been attention-seeking.

Maclennan spat out another mouthful of water. His strength was fading fast. The undertow sucked at him, the swell smashing water into his mouth and nose. He didn't feel cold any more. Vaguely, he heard the *pocka-pocka* of a helicopter. He was drifting now, in a place where everything felt very calm. Air/Sea Rescue, that would be the noise he could hear. He swallowed another mouthful of water.

He felt very light now, the sea a bed rocking him gently to sleep. Barney Maclennan, asleep on the ocean wave.

PART TWO

6

November 2003; Glenrothes, Scotland

ACC James Lawson eased his official Rover into the slot that bore his name in the police HQ car park. He picked up his briefcase from the passenger seat and walked briskly towards the building. He punched his security code into the keypad by the back door and headed for the lift. Instead of going to his office, he made for the fourth-floor room where the cold cases squad was based.

With one exception, Lawson had handpicked the team of half a dozen detectives. That exception was an officer whose presence in the room troubled Lawson. Not because he was an inadequate copper, but because he had far too much at stake. Detective Inspector Robin Maclennan's brother Barney had died in the course of investigating one of these cold cases, and if it had been up to Lawson he'd have

been allowed nowhere near the review. But Maclennan had appealed over his head to the Chief Constable, who had overruled Lawson.

The one thing he'd managed to achieve was to keep Maclennan away from the Rosie Duff case itself. Maclennan had an operational link to one of the other cases, so Lawson had persuaded his boss to let him assign the DI to the case of Lesley Cameron, a student who had been raped and murdered in St Andrews eighteen years ago. Lawson thought Maclennan was likely looking over the shoulder of the detective assigned to the Rosie Duff case, but at least his personal feelings couldn't interfere directly with that investigation.

That morning, only two officers were at their desks. Detective Constable Phil Parhatka had probably the most sensitive case in the review. The victim was a young man found murdered in his home. His best friend had been convicted of the crime, but embarrassing revelations about the police investigation had led to the conviction being overturned on appeal. The repercussions had sunk several careers, and now the pressure was on to find the real killer.

As Lawson walked in, the other officer was getting to her feet. DC Karen Pirie yanked a sheepskin coat off the back of her chair and shrugged into it. She gave Lawson a weary smile. 'There's nothing else for it. I'm going to have to talk to the original witnesses.'

'There's no point in that until you've dealt with the physical evidence,' Lawson said. 'It isn't in the box it's supposed to be in. You're going to have to go down to the warehouse and do a manual search.'

Karen looked appalled. 'That could take weeks.'

'I know. But that's all there is for it.'

'But, sir . . . what about the budget?'

Lawson sighed. 'Let me worry about the budget. I don't see the alternative. We need that evidence to apply pressure. The evidence custody team haven't got the bodies to do a search, so you'll have to.'

Karen hefted her bag onto her shoulder. 'Right you are, sir.'

'If anyone can find it, you can. Do your best, Karen.'

He watched her leave, her very walk a simulacrum of the doggedness that had instigated his matching of Karen Pirie with the twenty-five-year-old murder of Rosemary Duff. With a few words of encouragement to Parhatka, Lawson set off for his office.

He settled himself behind his desk and felt a niggle of worry that things might not work out as he had hoped in the cold case review. It wouldn't be enough merely to say they'd done their best. They needed at least one result. He reached for his in-tray and scanned some memos. The next item was a letter from a member of the public.

12 Carlton Way, St Monans, Fife
November 8, 2003

Dear ACC Lawson,

I read with interest a newspaper report that Fife Police have instigated a cold case review on unsolved murders. I presume that, among these cases, you will be looking at the murder of Rosemary Duff. I would like to meet with you to discuss this case. I have information which may contribute to your understanding of the background. I have reason to believe that the police were not aware of this information at the time of the original investigation.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Macfadyen

GRAHAM MACFADYEN had dressed carefully. He wanted to make the right impression on ACC Lawson. He'd been afraid the policeman would write off his letter as the work of some attention-seeking nutter. But to his surprise, he'd had a reply by return of post. What was even more surprising was that Lawson himself had written, asking him to call to arrange an appointment. It impressed him that the police were clearly taking the matter so seriously. When he'd rung, Lawson had suggested they meet at Macfadyen's home in St Monans. 'More informal than here at headquarters,' he'd said. Macfadyen suspected that Lawson wanted to see him on his home turf, the better to make an assessment of his mental state.

He studied himself in the mirror. He'd learned that blending in was the perfect way to avoid unwanted attention. Today he wanted to look relaxed, average, unthreatening. Not weird. He knew most people thought anyone who worked with computers was automatically weird, and he didn't want Lawson to jump to the same conclusion. He wasn't weird. Just different. But that was definitely something he didn't want Lawson to pick up on.

He ran a comb through his thick dark hair, scowling slightly at his reflection. A woman had once told him he resembled James Dean, but he'd dismissed it as a pathetic attempt to get him to take an interest in her. He'd never seen the point of dating and, if he was honest, he didn't feel the lack of a woman in his life. He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to kill. Macfadyen walked through to the spare bedroom and sat down at one of the three computers. He had one lie to tell, and if he was going to be convincing, he needed to be calm.

JAMES LAWSON drove slowly up Carlton Way. It was a crescent of small detached homes, built in the 1990s. Graham Macfadyen's house was one of the smaller ones. Two receps, two beds, Lawson thought. No garage, but an elderly silver VW Golf sat in the drive. Lawson parked on the street, walked up the path, and rang the bell.

The door opened, revealing a man in his late twenties. Medium height, slim build, a mop of dark, wavy hair, deep-set blue eyes, wide cheekbones and a full, almost feminine mouth. No criminal convictions, Lawson knew from his background check. But far too young to have any personal knowledge of the Rosie Duff case.

'Mr Macfadyen?' Lawson said.

The man nodded. 'You must be Assistant Chief Constable Lawson.'

Lawson smiled. 'No need for rank. Mr Lawson is fine.'

Macfadyen stepped back. 'Come in.'

Lawson followed him down a narrow hallway into a neat living room. A three-piece suite in brown leather faced a TV set next to a video and a DVD player. Shelves on either side held video and DVD boxes. The only other furniture in the room was a cabinet containing glasses and bottles of whisky. But Lawson only took that in later. What hit him between the eyes was the only picture on the walls. An atmospheric photograph blown up to twenty by thirty inches, taken with the sun low in the sky, showed the cists of the Pictish cemetery on Hallow Hill where Rosie Duff had been discovered.

'Can I offer you a drink?' Macfadyen asked.

Lawson shook his head. 'No, thanks.' He sat down, the assurance of years as a police officer granting him permission.

Macfadyen settled in the armchair opposite. 'You said in your letter that you have some information on the Rosemary Duff case?' he began cautiously.

'That's right.' Macfadyen leaned forward slightly. 'Rosie Duff was my mother.'

LAWSON WAS INCREDULOUS. No mention of a child had ever been made during the investigation into Rosie's death. But Macfadyen was adamant.

'You must have known she had a child,' he insisted. 'Surely the pathologist noted it at the post-mortem?'

Lawson's mind instantly summoned up the shambling figure of Dr Kenneth Fraser. He'd already been semi-retired by the time of the murder and generally smelt more of whisky than of formalin. 'It never came out,' he said, avoiding further comment.

'That's incredible,' Macfadyen said.

'Maybe the wound obscured the evidence.'

'I suppose that's possible,' Macfadyen said dubiously. 'I assumed you knew about me but had never been able to trace me. I always knew I was adopted,' he said. 'But I thought it only fair to my adoptive parents to wait till they'd both died before I carried out any research into my birth mother. My dad died three years ago. And my mother . . . well, she's in a home. She's got Alzheimer's. So a few months ago, I started making inquiries.' He handed a blue cardboard folder to Lawson. 'There you go,' he said.

The policeman opened the folder. He flicked through the bundle of papers inside, absorbing the gist of the correspondence. He arrived at a birth certificate and paused. There, in the space reserved for the mother's name, Rosemary Margaret Duff. Date of birth, May 25, 1959. Where the father's name should have been, the word 'unknown'. But the address was unfamiliar.

Lawson looked up. 'Livingstone House, Saline?' he asked.

'A Church of Scotland home where young women in trouble were sent to have their babies. I managed to track down the woman who ran the place then. Ina Dryburgh. She's in her seventies now. I was surprised how willing she was to talk to me. But she said it was too far in the past to hurt anybody now.'

'What did she tell you?' Lawson leaned forward in his seat.

'Rosie got pregnant when she was fifteen. She found the courage to tell her mother when she was about three months gone, before anybody guessed. Her mother went to see the minister and he put her in touch with Livingstone House. Mrs Duff went to see Mrs Dryburgh, who agreed to take Rosie. She suggested Mrs Duff put it about that Rosie had gone to stay with a relative who'd had an operation and needed an extra pair of hands round the house to help with her children. Rosie left Strathkinness that weekend and went to Saline. She spent the rest of the pregnancy under Mrs Dryburgh's wing.'

Macfadyen swallowed hard. 'She never held me. Never even saw me. She had a photo, that was all. They did things differently back then. I was handed over to my parents that same day. And by the end of the week, Rosie was back in Strathkinness as if nothing had happened. Mrs Dryburgh said the next time she heard Rosie's name was on the news.' He gave a short, sharp exhalation. 'And that's when she told me my mother had been dead for twenty-five years. Murdered. With nobody ever brought to book. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to contact the rest of my family. I found out that my

grandparents were both dead. But I've got two uncles, apparently.'

'You haven't made contact with them?'

'I didn't know whether I should. And then I saw the article in the paper about the cold case review, and thought I'd speak to you first.'

Lawson looked at the floor. 'Unless they've changed since I knew them, I'd say you might be well advised to let sleeping dogs lie.' He felt Macfadyen's eyes on him and raised his head. 'Brian and Colin were always very protective of Rosie. My guess is that they'd take what you have to say as a slur on her character. I don't think it would make for a happy family reunion.'

'I thought, you know . . . maybe they'd see me as some part of Rosie that lived on?'

'I wouldn't bank on it,' Lawson said firmly.

'But if this information helped your new inquiry? They might see it differently then, don't you think? Surely they want to see her killer caught at last?'

'To be honest, I don't see how this takes us any further forward. You were born nearly four years before your mother died.'

'But what if she was still seeing my father? What if that had something to do with her murder?'

'There was no evidence of that sort of long-term relationship in Rosie's past. She'd had several boyfriends in the year before she died, none of them serious. But that didn't leave room for anybody else.'

'Well, what if he'd gone away and come back? I read the newspaper reports of her murder, and there was some suggestion she was seeing somebody, but nobody knew who. Maybe my father came back, and she didn't want her parents to know she was seeing the boy who'd got her pregnant.'

'It's a theory, I suppose. But if nobody knew who the father of her child was, it still doesn't take us anywhere.'

'But you didn't know then that she'd had a child. I bet you never asked who she was going out with four years before her murder. Maybe her brothers knew who my father was.'

Lawson sighed. 'I'm not going to hold out false hope to you, Mr Macfadyen. For one thing, Brian and Colin Duff were desperate for us to find Rosie's killer. If the father of Rosie's child had still been around, or if he'd reappeared, you can lay money they'd have been screaming at us to arrest him.'

Macfadyen compressed his lips into a thin line. 'So you're not going to pursue this line of inquiry?'

'If I may, I'd like to take this folder and have a copy made to pass

on to the detective who's dealing with your mother's case. It can't hurt to include it in our inquiry and it might just be helpful.'

The light of triumph danced briefly in Macfadyen's eyes. 'So you'll be wanting a blood sample from me?'

Lawson frowned. 'A blood sample?'

Macfadyen jumped to his feet. 'Wait a minute,' he said, leaving the room. When he returned, he was grasping a thick paperback. 'I've read everything I could find about my mother's murder,' he said, thrusting the book at Lawson.

Lawson glanced at the cover. *Getting Away with Murder: The Greatest Unsolved Cases of the Twentieth Century*.

'It says there were traces of semen on her body and clothing. That in spite of the primitive levels of forensic analysis back then, you were able to establish that three of the students who found her were possible candidates for having deposited it. But surely, with what you can do now, you can compare the DNA in the semen to my DNA? If it belonged to my father, you'd be able to tell.'

'If we were going to make comparisons with anyone, it wouldn't be you, Graham, it would be with the four lads who found her.'

Macfadyen pounced. 'You said, "if". "*If* we were going to make comparisons". Not when. If.'

'This is very embarrassing, Mr Macfadyen,' Lawson said. 'At some point in the past twenty-five years, the physical evidence relating to your mother's murder has been mislaid.'

Macfadyen's face screwed up in an expression of angry incredulity. 'What do you mean, mislaid?'

'The evidence has been moved three times. Once, when the police station in St Andrews moved to a new site. Then it was sent to central storage at headquarters. Recently, we moved to a new storage facility. At some point the evidence bags that contained your mother's clothes were mislaid. When we looked for them, they weren't in the box where they should have been.'

'How could that happen?'

Lawson squirmed. 'The only explanation I can offer is human error. We're not infallible.'

Macfadyen shook his head. 'It's not the only explanation. Someone could have removed it deliberately.'

'Why would anyone do that?'

'Well, the killer wouldn't want it found now, would he? Everybody knows about DNA. As soon as you announced a cold case review, he must have known he was living on borrowed time.'

'The evidence was locked up in police storage. And we've not had any break-ins reported.'

Macfadyen snorted. 'You wouldn't need to break in. You'd just need to wave enough money under the right nose. Everybody has their price, even police officers.'

'That's a very serious allegation,' Lawson said. 'And one for which there is no foundation whatsoever.'

'Is that it, then? You're just going to stage a cover-up?'

'There's nothing to cover up, Mr Macfadyen. I can assure you that the officer in charge of the case is conducting a search of the storage facility. It's possible she may yet find the evidence.'

'But not very likely,' he said heavily.

'No,' Lawson agreed. 'Not very likely.'

A FEW DAYS passed before James Lawson had a chance to follow up his interview with Rosie Duff's son. He had a quick word with Karen Pirie, but she was pessimistic about getting a result from the evidence warehouse.

'Needle in a haystack, sir,' she said. 'I've already found three misfiled bags of evidence. If the public knew . . .'

'Let's make sure they never do,' Lawson said grimly.

Karen looked horrified. 'Oh God, aye.'

Lawson had hoped the cockup with the evidence in the Duff case could be buried. But that hope had died thanks to his own carelessness with Macfadyen. And now he was going to have to confess it all over again. If it ever came out that he'd kept this particular piece of information from the family, his name would be smeared across the headlines. And that would benefit nobody.

Strathkinness hadn't changed much in twenty-five years, Lawson realised as he parked the car outside Caberfeidh Cottage. He pushed open the gate, rang the bell and waited.

The man who opened the door was in good shape. Lawson knew he was in his mid-forties, but Brian Duff looked ten years younger. His skin had the glow of a man who enjoys the outdoors; his short hair showed little sign of receding. He made Lawson feel like an old man. Brian looked him up and down and indulged in a look of disdain. 'Oh, it's you,' he said.

'Withholding evidence could be construed as police obstruction. And that's a crime.' Lawson wasn't going to be put on the back foot by Brian Duff.

'I don't know what you're on about. I've kept my nose clean for over

twenty years. You've no call to come slinging your accusations about.'

'I'm going back more than twenty years, Brian. I'm talking about your sister's murder.'

'I heard you were trying to go out in a blaze of glory, getting your foot soldiers to try and solve your old failures.'

'Hardly my failure. I was just a bobby on the beat back then. Are you going to invite me in, or are we going to do this here for the whole world to see?'

Duff shrugged. 'I've nothing to hide. You might as well come in.'

Lawson followed Duff into the kitchen. Duff leaned against the cooker. 'So what are you on about? Withholding evidence?'

'None of you ever mentioned Rosie's son,' Lawson said.

'That would be because it had nothing to do with her murder.'

'Don't you think that was for us to decide?'

'No. It happened years before. The boy she was going out with then didn't even live round here any more. And nobody knew about the baby outside the family. How could it have had anything to do with her death? We didn't want her name dragged through the mud, the way it would have been if your lot had got hold of it. You'd have made her look like some slag who got what was coming to her. Anything to take the heat off the fact that you couldn't do your job.'

'That's not true, Brian.'

'Aye, it is. You'd have leaked it to the papers. And they'd have turned Rosie into the village bike. She wasn't like that, and you know it.'

Lawson conceded the point. 'I know she wasn't. But you should have told us. It might have had some bearing on the investigation.'

'It would have been a wild-goose chase. How come you found out about it after all this time?'

'Rosie's son has more of a social conscience than you. He came to us when he saw the story in the papers about the cold case review. He wants to find his mother's killer as much as you do.'

Duff shook his head. 'I doubt that very much. Does he know where me and Colin live?'

'He knows you live here. He knows Colin's got a house in Kingsbarns, though he's mostly out in the Gulf. I told him I didn't think you'd be very pleased to meet him.'

'You're right about that. Maybe it would have been different if you'd put her killer away. But I for one don't want to be reminded of that part of Rosie's life.' He rubbed the back of his hand against his eye. 'So, are you finally going to nail those fucking students?'

Lawson shifted his weight. 'We don't know it was them, Brian.'

'Don't give me that shite. You know they were in the frame. You've got to be looking at them again.'

'We're doing our best. But it's not looking promising.'

'You've got DNA now. Surely that makes a difference? You had semen on her clothes.'

Lawson looked away. 'There's a problem,' he said.

'What kind of a problem?'

'The evidence has been mislaid.'

Duff pushed himself upright, tense on the balls of his feet. 'You've lost the evidence?' His eyes blazed rage.

'I didn't say lost. I said mislaid. It's not where it should be. We're pulling out all the stops to track it down, and I'm hopeful it'll turn up. But right now, we're stymied.'

Duff's fists clenched. 'So those four bastards are still safe?'

LAWSON SAT at his desk a month later, the memory of Duff's fury still reverberating in his chest, despite his supposedly relaxing fishing holiday. But although he'd spent half the day scribbling the date on assorted pieces of paper alongside his initials, Lawson had managed entirely to avoid its significance. Then he came across a request from DC Parhatka for authorisation of a DNA test on an emerging suspect in his inquiry. The combination of the date and the cold case review team made the tumblers of his mind clatter into place.

Now the need for a result in the cold case review somehow seemed even more pressing. With a sigh, Lawson pushed back his chair and headed for the squad room.

IN SPITE of the climate-controlled warmth of his office, Alex Gilbey shivered. He looked down at Edinburgh's Dundas Street. Exhaust fumes billowed from the traffic that made the routes into the city centre even more clogged than usual. He looked up at the December sky. Leaden and low, it was advertising snow. His spirits sank further. He'd been doing pretty well so far this year. But if it snowed, all his determination would unravel and he'd be back in his usual seasonal gloom. Today of all days, he could do without the snow. Exactly twenty-five years ago, he'd stumbled across something that had turned every Christmas since into a maelstrom of bad memories. No amount of goodwill could erase the anniversary of Rosie Duff's death from Alex's mental calendar.

He must, he thought, be the only manufacturer of greetings cards who hated the most profitable season of the year. In the accounts

department, they'd be smiling. This year's figures were up almost eight per cent on the previous year, thanks in part to a new range of cards Alex had developed himself. Though it had been more than ten years since he'd moved on from earning his living with his pens and inks, Alex liked to make the occasional contribution to the product range. Nothing like it to keep the rest of the team on their toes.

This malaise was seasonal. As soon as Twelfth-night saw the Christmas decorations consigned to storage once more, the shade of Rosie Duff would grow insubstantial, leaving his mind unclouded by memory. He'd be able to take pleasure in life again.

He'd tried a variety of strategies over the years to make it go away. On the second anniversary, he'd drunk himself into oblivion. The year after that, he'd visited Rosie's grave in the Western Cemetery on the edge of St Andrews. He'd waited till dusk, pulled a tweed cap over his eyes, turned up his coat collar and skulked into the gloom.

It was a simple black granite block. The letters were incised in gold: ROSEMARY MARGARET DUFF. BORN MAY 25, 1959. CRUELLY SNATCHED FROM US DECEMBER 16, 1978. A LOVING DAUGHTER AND SISTER LOST TO US FOR EVER. MAY SHE REST IN PEACE.

At the foot of the stone lay an assortment of floral tributes. There must have been a dozen bunches and sprays of flowers, a potent reminder of how many hearts Rosie Duff still inhabited. Alex unbuttoned his overcoat and took out the single white rose he'd brought with him. He'd crouched down to place it with the others when he nearly pissed himself. The hand on his shoulder came out of nowhere. The wet grass had absorbed the footsteps.

Alex spun round and away from the hand, slipping on the grass and sprawling on his back. He cringed, expecting a kick or a blow as whoever had disturbed him realised who he was.

'Hey, Gilly, you OK?' Sigmund Malkiewicz extended a hand to help Alex to his feet. 'I didn't mean to give you a fright.'

'Christ, Ziggy, what else did you think you were going to do, creeping up on me in a dark graveyard?' Alex said, scrambling upright.

'Sorry.' He indicated the rose with a jerk of his head. 'Nice touch. I could never think what might be appropriate.'

'You've been here before?' Alex turned to face his oldest friend.

Ziggy nodded. 'On the anniversaries. Never saw you before, though.'

Alex shrugged. 'My first time. Anything to try and make it go away, you know?'

'I don't think I'll ever manage that.'

'Me neither.'

They walked back to the entrance, each locked in bad memories. By unspoken agreement, once they'd left university, they'd avoided speaking about the event that had changed their lives so profoundly.

At the gate, Ziggy pulled Alex into a tight hug. 'We'll see each other over the New Year, right? Town Square, midnight?'

'Aye. Me and Lynn, we'll be there.'

Ziggy nodded, raised his hand in a mock salute and walked away into the gathering dark.

Alex hadn't been back to the grave since. It hadn't helped. But at least he didn't have to suffer in secret, the way he believed the others did. Lynn had known everything about the death of Rosie Duff from the word go. They'd been together since that winter.

In two months, please God, she'd be delivered of the child they'd both desired for so long. They'd been through years of trying, then out of the blue Lynn had become pregnant. It felt like the first fresh start he'd had in twenty-five years.

The phone began to ring. Startled, Alex stared stupidly at it for a moment before he reached for it. 'Alex Gilbey speaking.'

'Alex, it's Paul. Paul Martin.'

Paul. Ziggy's Paul. A particle physicist, whatever that was, with the build of a quarterback. The man who'd been bringing a dazzle to Ziggy's face for the past ten years. 'Hi, Paul. This is a surprise.'

'Alex, I don't know how to say this . . .' Paul's voice cracked. 'I got bad news.'

'Ziggy?'

'He's dead, Alex. Ziggy's dead.'

'No,' Alex said. 'No, there must be some mistake.'

'I wish,' Paul said. 'There's no mistake, Alex. The house, it went on fire in the night. Burned to the ground. My Ziggy . . . he's dead.'

7

Alex had no recollection of the drive out of Edinburgh, across the Forth Bridge and down into North Queensferry. Dazed, he eased the car into his drive and parked, leaving plenty of space for Lynn's car nearer the house.

The first thing he did after slamming the door against the elements was to pour himself a brandy. He took his glass and continued

through to the large conservatory that commanded a panoramic view of the Firth of Forth, and sat in the gloom, oblivious to the shipping lights twinkling on the water. He didn't know how to begin to deal with the afternoon's news. Ziggy had been part of his life for over thirty years. They'd shared every rite of passage, and without him Alex felt cast adrift from his own history.

'Alex?' His wife's voice cut into his numb reverie. He'd been so locked inside himself, he hadn't noticed her car arrive, nor the sound of her footfalls. He turned towards the faint waft of her perfume.

'Why are you sitting in the dark? And why are you home so early?' There was no accusation in her voice, just concern.

Alex shook his head. He didn't want to share the news.

'Something's wrong,' Lynn insisted, covering the distance between them and dropping into the chair next to him. She put a hand on his arm. 'Alex? What is it?'

At the sound of her disquiet, the anaesthetic of shock vanished abruptly. A searing pain knifed through him, taking his breath away momentarily. He met Lynn's worried eyes and flinched. Without words, he put his hand out and laid it gently on her stomach.

Lynn covered his hand with hers. 'Alex, tell me what's happened.'

'Ziggy,' he managed. 'Ziggy's dead.'

Lynn's mouth opened. A frown of incredulity gathered. 'Ziggy?'

'There was a fire. At the house. In the night. Paul phoned me.'

'How could that be? Him and Ziggy, they shared a bed. How can Paul be all right and Ziggy dead?'

'Paul wasn't there. He was giving a guest lecture at Stanford. He flew back in the morning. Drove home from the airport. And found firemen and cops poking through what used to be their house.'

Tears sparkled on Lynn's eyelashes. 'That must have been . . . Oh, dear God. Do they have any idea what happened?'

'They told Paul it was too early to say. But he said they were asking him some sharp questions. He thinks it looks suspicious, and they're thinking him being away was a bit too convenient.'

'Oh God, poor Paul. Losing Ziggy, that's hellish enough. But to have the police on his back too . . . Poor, poor Paul.'

'He asked me if I'd tell Weird and Mondo.' Alex shook his head. 'I haven't been able to do it yet.'

'I'll call Mondo,' Lynn said. 'But you'll have to deal with Weird. I don't think I could handle being told that Jesus loves me right now.'

Alex swallowed the last drops of brandy. 'You know what day it is?'

Lynn froze. 'Oh, Jesus Christ Almighty.'

WAITING WAS ONE of the things Graham Macfadyen did best. His adoptive father had been a passionate amateur ornithologist, and the boy had been forced to spend long tracts of his youth killing time between sightings of interesting birds. He'd learned stillness at an early age; anything to avoid his father's vicious sarcasm. The secret was to dress for the weather. So although he'd spent most of the day enduring snow flurries and cold gusts of wind, he was comfortable in his down parka, his waterproof fleece-lined trousers and his walking boots. He was grateful for the shooting stick he'd brought with him, for his observation post offered nowhere to sit except gravestones. And that felt like bad manners.

He'd taken time off work. It had meant lying, but that was also something he did well. He didn't think Lawson had entertained the slightest doubt when he'd claimed to have loved his adoptive parents. God knows, he'd tried to love them. But the constant attrition of their disapproval and disappointment had left him numb and isolated. It would have been different with his real mother, he felt sure. But he'd been deprived of the chance to find out, leaving him with a fantasy of being instrumental in making someone pay for that.

He'd arrived just after seven and made his way to the grave. He'd laid the discreet floral tribute at the foot of the headstone, then made his way to the vantage point he'd scouted on his last visit. Someone would come. He'd felt sure of it. But, as the hands of his watch moved towards seven o'clock, he began to wonder. To hell with what Lawson had told him about staying away from his uncles. He was going to make contact.

He saw a darker shape against the graves. It resolved itself to the outline of a man, walking briskly along the path towards him.

Head down against the weather, the man left the path and picked his way through the grave markers. As he grew closer, Macfadyen could see he carried a posy of flowers. The man came to a halt five feet from Rosie's gravestone. He bowed his head and stood for a long moment. As he bent to place the flowers, Macfadyen moved forward, the snow muffling his steps.

The man straightened and took a step backwards, cannoning into Macfadyen. 'What the . . .!' he exclaimed, swinging round.

Macfadyen held up his hands in a placatory gesture. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.' He pushed back the hood of his parka.

The man scowled at him. 'Do I know you?' he said, his voice as belligerent as his stance.

Macfadyen didn't hesitate. 'I think you're my uncle,' he said.

LYNN LEFT ALEX to make his phone call. Distracted, she went through to the kitchen and diced chicken, tossing it into a casserole with some roughly chopped onions and peppers. She poured over a jar of ready-made sauce and shoved it in the oven.

Alex should have finished his call to Weird by now, she thought. She couldn't postpone talking to her brother any longer.

When she stopped to think about it, it seemed odd to Lynn that, despite the blood ties, Mondo had become the most disengaged member of the original quartet. She often thought that if it weren't for the fact that they were brother and sister, he'd have disappeared completely from Alex's radar. He was geographically closest, over in Glasgow. But by the end of university, it seemed he wanted to shed all ties that bound him to his childhood and adolescence.

He'd been first to leave the country, heading to France after graduation to pursue a career in academe. He'd scarcely returned to Scotland in the following three years. Lynn doubted whether he'd have bothered to attend her wedding to Alex if he hadn't been back in the UK by then, lecturing at Manchester University.

It made a kind of sense. She understood the shame and guilt Mondo had felt over Barney Maclennan's death. She supposed the presence of the other three triggered memories he wanted to erase.

After a string of relationships, Mondo had finally married Hélène, a French student ten years his junior who scarcely bothered to hide her contempt for anyone who couldn't discourse with equal ease on Foucault or couture. Alex she despised for choosing commerce over art. Lynn she patronised with lukewarm enthusiasm for her career as a fine art restorer. Like her and Alex, they were childless thus far, but Lynn suspected from choice.

She supposed distance should make the passing on of this news easier. But still, lifting the phone was one of the hardest things she'd done. The call was answered by Hélène. 'Hello, Lynn. How nice to hear from you. I'll just get David,' she said. A minute passed, then her brother's voice sounded in her ear.

'Lynn,' he said. 'How are you doing?'

'Mondo, I'm afraid I've got some bad news.'

'Not the parents?' He jumped in before she could say more.

'No, they're fine. Alex got a call this afternoon from Seattle. Ziggy's dead.' Silence. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'I didn't know he was ill,' Mondo finally said.

'He wasn't ill. The house caught fire in the night. Ziggy was in bed, asleep. He died in the fire.'

'That's terrible. Jesus. Poor Ziggy. I can't believe it.'

'I know. It's hard to take it in. We had such a lovely time with him and Paul in California in September. It feels so unreal.'

'And Paul? Is he dead too?'

'No. He was away overnight. He came back to find the house burnt down and Ziggy dead.'

'God. That's going to point the finger at him.'

'I'm sure that's the last thing on his mind right now,' Lynn snapped.

'You misunderstand me. I just meant it would make it all so much worse for him. Christ, Lynn, I know what it means to have everybody looking at you as if you're a murderer,' Mondo flashed back.

There was a silence while both retreated from confrontation. 'Alex is going over for the funeral,' Lynn offered as an olive branch.

'Oh, I don't think I'll be able to manage that,' Mondo said. 'We're off to France in a couple of days, flights booked and everything.'

Lynn stared at the wall in disbelief. 'You four were like blood brothers. Isn't that worth a bit of disruption to your plans?'

There was a long silence. Then Mondo said, 'I don't want to go, Lynn. It doesn't mean I don't care about Ziggy. I just hate funerals. Of course, I'll write to Paul.'

Lynn suddenly felt worn out, grateful that she had taken the burden of this conversation from Alex. 'None of us would want you to be upset,' she sighed. 'Well, I'll let you go, Mondo.'

'Just a minute, Lynn,' he said. 'Was it today Ziggy died?'

'The early hours of the morning, yes.'

A sharp suck of breath. 'That's pretty spooky. You know it's twenty-five years today since Rosie Duff died?'

'We hadn't forgotten. I'm surprised you remembered.'

He gave a bitter laugh. 'You think I could forget the day my life was destroyed? It's carved on my heart.'

LAWSON STUCK his head round the door of the cold case squad room on his way out. The only person still there was Robin Maclennan.

'You're late at it,' Lawson said.

Robin shrugged. 'Diane's taken the kids to the pictures. I thought I might as well be sitting here as in an empty house.'

'I know what you mean. I often feel the same myself since Marian died last year.'

'Is your boy not at home?'

Lawson snorted. 'My boy's twenty-two now, Robin. Fancy a pint?'

Robin looked mildly surprised. 'Aye, OK,' he said.

They agreed on a small pub on the outskirts of Kirkcaldy, a short journey home for both of them afterwards. Lawson bought a couple of pints and whisky chasers while Robin found a quiet table.

Robin looked startled at the two drinks in front of him. 'Thanks, sir,' he said.

'Forget the rank, Robin. Just for tonight, eh?' Lawson took a long draught of his beer. 'To tell you the truth, I was glad to see you sitting there. I wanted a drink tonight, and I didn't want to drink alone.' He eyed him curiously. 'You know what today is?'

Robin's face grew cautious. 'It's the 16th of December.'

'I think you can do better than that.'

Robin picked up his whisky and knocked it back in one. 'It's twenty-five years since Rosie Duff was murdered.'

'I thought you'd know.'

They drank in uneasy silence for a few minutes.

'How's Karen getting on with it?' Robin asked.

'I thought you'd know better than me. The boss is always the last to know, isn't that how it goes?'

Robin gave a wry smile. 'Not in this case. I'm the last person she wants to talk to. Like everybody else, she's embarrassed to talk about Barney's big failure.'

'Is that how you see it? Barney's big failure?'

Robin shook his head impatiently. 'That's how Barney saw it.'

'I remember he took it very personally.'

'You could say that.' Robin stared into his whisky. 'I wanted to help. I only went into the police because I wanted to be like Barney.'

Lawson nodded. 'Barney was a great cop. A hard act to follow. And the way he died, it made me sick to my stomach. I always thought we should have charged Davey Kerr.'

Robin looked up, puzzled. 'Charged him? What with? Attempting suicide's not a crime.'

Lawson looked startled. 'But . . . Right enough, Robin. What was I thinking about?' he stammered. 'Forget what I said.'

Robin leaned forward. 'Tell me what you were going to say.'

'Nothing, really. Nothing.' Lawson took a drink to cover his confusion. He coughed and choked, spluttering whisky.

'You were going to say something about the way Barney died.'

Lawson wiped his mouth and sighed. 'I thought you knew.'

'Knew what?'

'Culpable homicide, that's what the charge sheet against Davey Kerr should have read.'

Robin frowned. 'That would never have stood up in court. Kerr didn't mean to go over the edge, it was an accident.'

Lawson eyed Robin. 'Christ,' he said softly. 'I know we decided to keep it quiet, but I was sure you would have heard.'

'I still don't know what you're talking about,' Robin said.

'I was the front man on the rope,' Lawson said. 'I saw it with my own eyes. When we were pulling them up the cliff, Kerr panicked and kicked Barney off him.'

'You're saying Kerr pushed him back into the sea to save his own skin? How come I'm just hearing this now?'

Lawson shrugged. 'I don't know. When I told the superintendent what I'd seen, he was shocked. But he said there was no point pursuing it. The fiscal's office would never have gone through with a prosecution. The defence would have argued that in those conditions I couldn't have seen what I saw. That we were being vindictive because Barney died trying to save Kerr. So they decided to keep the lid on it.'

Robin picked up his glass, his hand shaking so much it chattered against his teeth. All colour had drained from his face, leaving him grey and sweaty. 'I don't believe this.'

'I know what I saw, Robin. I'm sorry, I assumed you knew.'

'This is the first . . .' He looked around him, as if he couldn't understand where he was or how he'd got here. 'I'm sorry, I've got to get out of here.' Abruptly he got to his feet and headed for the door.

AS ALEX EMERGED into the concourse of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, it was hard to focus on the people waiting to meet the passengers. If Paul hadn't waved, he might have missed him. Alex hurried towards him and the two men embraced.

'Thanks for coming,' Paul said quietly.

'Lynn sends her love,' Alex said. 'She wanted to be here, but . . .'

'I know. You've wanted this baby so long, you can't take chances.' Paul reached for Alex's suitcase and led the way towards the exit.

Out in the car park Paul came to a stop by his SUV and stowed Alex's suitcase in the luggage space. He climbed behind the wheel.

'I'm staying at a decent motel about ten minutes from the house. I booked you in too. If you'd rather be in the city, we can change it.'

'No. I'd rather be with you.' Alex gave Paul a wan smile. 'That way we can get maudlin together.'

They were silent as Paul headed towards Seattle. Ziggy and Paul's home had been outside the city limits, a two-storey wooden house built on a hillside with breathtaking views.

Paul turned off the main highway a couple of miles before the exit that led to his former home. The road led through pine trees to a bluff that looked across towards Whidbey Island. The motel had gone for the log cabin style and the individual cabins at the edge of the trees were attractive enough. Paul left Alex to unpack.

'I'll see you in the bar in a while, OK?'

Alex hung up his funeral suit and shirt, then trudged across to the bar. He found Paul in a booth nursing a bottle of Pyramid ale. He signalled to the barman for another of the same and slid in opposite Paul. Now he had the chance to look at him properly, he could see the signs of strain and grief. Paul's light brown hair was rumpled and unwashed, his blue eyes weary and red-rimmed.

'How are you holding up?' Alex asked.

Paul shook his head. 'I don't think it's hit me yet. There's been so much to take care of, letting people know, making the funeral arrangements and stuff. Which reminds me. Your friend Tom, the one Ziggy called Weird? He's coming in tomorrow.'

The news provoked a mixed reaction in Alex. Part of him longed for the connection to his past that Weird would provide. And part of him dreaded the aggravation that Weird, now the Reverend Tom Mackie, would trail in his wake if he went off on his fundamentalist homophobia. 'He's not going to preach at the funeral, is he?'

'No. We're having a humanist service.' Paul sipped his beer, then said, 'There's something I need to tell you, Alex. It's about the fire.'

Alex looked puzzled. 'The fire?'

Paul massaged the bridge of his nose. 'The fire wasn't an accident, Alex. It was set. Deliberately.'

'Are they sure?'

'They've had arson investigators crawling all over the place.'

'But that's terrible. Who would do something like that to Ziggy?'

'Alex, I'm the cops' first pick.'

'But that's insane. You loved Ziggy.'

'Which is exactly why I'm the prime suspect. They always look at the spouse first, right?' Paul's tone was harsh.

Alex shook his head. 'Nobody who knew you two would entertain that idea for a minute.'

'But the cops didn't know us. And however hard they try to pretend different, most cops like gays as much as your friend Tom does.'

'I don't get it. How are you supposed to have burnt your house down when you were in California?'

'They're saying the fire started in the basement, by the heating-oil

tank. It looked like someone had stacked up cans of paint and gasoline at one end of the tank, then piled up paper and wood around them. Which we certainly didn't do. But they also found what looks like the remains of a fire bomb. A pretty simple device, they said.'

'Wasn't it destroyed in the fire?'

'These guys are good at reconstructing what happens in a fire.'

'And they think you did it?'

'They've got no other suspects. Ziggy wasn't exactly a guy who made enemies. And I'm the main beneficiary of his will. What's more, I'm a physicist. They seem to figure, "Hey, this guy's a scientist, he must know how to blow people up."'

Alex signalled to the barman to bring them fresh drinks. 'How hard would it have been to break in?'

'Not too hard,' Paul said. 'It wasn't wired into the security system because the guy who does our yard work in the summer has to get in and out of the basement. That way, we didn't have to give him details of the alarm system on the house.'

'What about Ziggy's work? Things go wrong in hospitals. Kids die or don't get better like they should. Parents need somebody to blame.'

'Sure, Ziggy lost patients from time to time. But one of the reasons he was such a successful paediatrician was that he made his patients and their families his friends. They trusted him, and they were right to do that. Because he was a good doctor.'

'I know. But sometimes when kids die, logic goes out the window.'

'There was nothing like that. If there had been, I'd have known. We talked to each other about everything.' Paul bit his lip and stared at the table. 'I'd give anything to have him back,' he said softly.

Alex gave him a moment to collect himself. 'They'll find the person who did this,' he said eventually.

'You think? I wish I could agree with you. What keeps going through my head is what you guys went through all those years ago. They never found who killed that girl. And everybody looked at you with different eyes because of it.' He looked up at Alex. 'I'm not strong like Ziggy was. I don't know if I can live with that.'

TEARS CASCADED down Alex's cheeks and he didn't care. Being far from home seemed to liberate him from his usual emotional reticence. Beside him, Weird loomed in an immaculately tailored cassock. He wasn't crying. His lips were moving constantly. Alex presumed this was a sign of devoutness rather than mental illness, since Weird's hand regularly strayed to the ostentatious silver cross on his chest.

When he'd first seen it at Sea-Tac airport, Alex had almost laughed out loud. Weird had strode confidently towards him, dropping his suit carrier to pull his old friend into a theatrical embrace. Alex noticed how smooth his skin appeared and speculated about plastic surgery.

'It was good of you to come,' Alex had said, leading the way to the hire car he'd picked up that morning.

'Ziggy was my oldest friend. Along with you and Mondo. I know our lives have moved in very different directions, but nothing could change that. The life I have now I owe in part to the friendship we shared. I'd be a very poor Christian to turn my back on that.'

Alex couldn't work out why everything Weird said sounded as if it were for public consumption. They'd only met a handful of times over the past twenty years, but on each occasion it had been the same—as if there were an unseen congregation hanging on his every word. Creeping Jesus, Lynn had christened him the first time they'd visited him in the small Georgia town where he'd based his ministry.

'How is Lynn?' Weird asked as he settled in the passenger seat.

'Seven months pregnant and blooming,' Alex said.

'Praise the Lord! I know how much you two have longed for this.' Weird's face lit up in what appeared to be a genuine smile. 'I thank the Lord for the blessing of children. The happiest memories I hold are of my five. The love a man feels for his children is deeper and more pure than anything else in this world. Alex, I know you're going to delight in this life-change.'

'Thanks, Weird.'

The reverend winced. 'I don't think that's an appropriate form of address these days.'

'Sorry, Tom. Old habits die hard. You'll always be Weird to me.'

AFTER THE SERVICE had finished, Alex and Weird walked out into weak sunshine, letting the flow of the crowd carry them past the floral tributes. In spite of Paul's request that only family should send flowers, there were a couple of dozen bouquets and wreaths.

Alex bent down to read the cards, then paused at the final wreath. It was small and discreet, a tight circlet of white roses and rosemary. Alex read the card and frowned. *Rosemary for remembrance.*

'You see this?' he asked Weird.

'Tasteful,' Weird said approvingly.

'You don't think it's a bit . . . Too close for comfort?'

Weird frowned. 'I think you're seeing ghosts where none exist. It's a perfectly appropriate tribute.'

'He died on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Rosie Duff's death. This card isn't signed. You don't think this is a bit heavy?'

'Alex, that's history. Do you seriously think there's anybody here but us who even knows Rosie Duff's name? It's just a slightly theatrical gesture, which, given the crowd that's here, is hardly—'

'They've reopened the case, you know.'

Weird looked surprised. 'No, I didn't know.'

'I read about it in the papers. They're doing a review of unsolved murders in the light of new technological advances. DNA and that.'

Weird's hand went to his cross. 'Thank the Lord.'

Puzzled, Alex said, 'You're not worried about all the old lies being taken out for an airing?'

'Why? We've nothing to fear. At last our names will be cleared.'

Alex looked troubled. 'I wish I thought it would be that easy.'

DR DAVID KERR pushed his laptop away from him with a sharp exhalation of annoyance. He'd been trying to polish the first draft of an article on contemporary French poetry for the past hour, but the words had been making less and less sense the longer he glared at the screen. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

However hard he tried to escape it, he couldn't get away from the realisation that, while he sat fiddling with his prose, Ziggy's friends and family were saying their final farewells half a world away. He wasn't sorry he hadn't gone. But the news of Ziggy's death had rekindled memories he had worked hard to submerge.

Yet when the phone rang, he reached for it without any sense of apprehension. 'Dr Kerr?' The voice was unfamiliar.

'Yes. Who's this?'

'Detective Inspector Robin Maclennan of Fife Police.' He spoke slowly and distinctly, like a man who knows he's had one more drink than was wise.

David shivered involuntarily. 'And why are you calling me?' he asked, hiding behind belligerence.

'I'm a member of the cold case review team. You may have read about it in the papers?'

'That doesn't answer my question,' David snapped.

'I wanted to talk to you about the circumstances of my brother's death. That would be DI Barney Maclennan.'

David was taken aback by the directness of the approach. He'd always dreaded a moment like this, but after nearly twenty-five years he'd persuaded himself it would never come.

'I have nothing to say to you,' David said. 'You people ruined my life once. I will not give you the opportunity to do it again.' He slammed the phone down, his hands shaking. David had felt sure that Maclennan wanted to talk about Rosie Duff, which would have been enough of an outrage. But Barney Maclennan? Surely Fife Police hadn't decided after twenty-five years to call it murder after all?

He shivered again, staring out into the night. The twinkling lights of the Christmas trees in the houses along the street seemed a thousand eyes, staring back at him. He jumped to his feet and yanked the study curtains closed. Then he leaned against the wall, eyes shut, heart pounding. David Kerr had done his best to bury the past. He'd done everything he could to keep it from his door. Clearly, that hadn't been enough. That left only one option. The question was, did he have the nerve to take it?

THE LIGHT from the study was suddenly obscured by heavy curtains. The watcher frowned. That was a break in the routine. He didn't like that. But eventually, things went back to normal. The lights went off downstairs. He knew the pattern by now. A lamp would come on in the bedroom at the front of the Bearsden villa, then David Kerr's wife would appear at the window. She'd draw the heavy drapes. Almost simultaneously light would shine down on the garage roof. The bathroom, he presumed. About twenty minutes later, the bedroom lights would go out. Nothing else would happen tonight.

Graham Macfadyen turned the key in the ignition and drove off into the night. He was beginning to get a feel for David Kerr's life, but he wanted to know more. Why, for example, he hadn't done what Alex Gilbey had, and caught a plane for Seattle. That was cold. How could you not pay your respects to someone who was not only one of your oldest friends but also your partner in crime?

Unless of course there had been some sort of estrangement. It must have taken time and distance to create such a rift. There had been nothing obvious in the immediate aftermath of their crime. He knew that now, thanks to his Uncle Brian.

The memory of that conversation ticked over in the back of his mind during most of his waking hours, reinforcing his determination. All he'd wanted was to find his parents; he'd never expected to be consumed by this search for a higher truth. But consumed he was. He was convinced that his mother's unquiet shade was watching him, spurring him on. Somebody had to pay.

His uncle had been less than thrilled by their encounter in the

graveyard. 'I've got nothing to say to you,' he'd snarled.

Macfadyen had stood his ground. 'I only want to talk about my mother. I've got a right to know.'

'If I talk to you, will you go away and leave us alone?'

Macfadyen considered for a moment. 'OK,' he said.

'Do you know the Lammas Bar?'

'I've been in a few times.'

Duff's eyebrows rose. 'I'll meet you there in half an hour.' He turned on his heel and stalked off.

Macfadyen hurried back to his car and drove to the Lammas Bar, finding a quiet table where they could talk in peace. He was halfway down his pint when Brian Duff pushed the door open and strode to the bar. Armed with a pint, he joined Macfadyen at the table.

'Right,' he said. 'How much do you know?'

'I looked up the newspaper archives. And there was a bit about the case in a crime book I found. But that just told me the bare facts.'

Duff took a long draught of his beer, never taking his eyes off Macfadyen. 'Facts, maybe. The truth? No way. Because you're not allowed to call people murderers unless a jury said so first.'

Macfadyen's pulse quickened. 'What do you mean?' he said.

Duff took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. 'Let me tell you the story. The night she died, Rosie was working here. She said she was going to a party, but she was meeting somebody after work. We all knew she'd been seeing someone, but she wouldn't let on who it was. Anyway, she left after closing time, and nobody saw who she met up with. It's like she just disappeared off the face of the earth for four hours.' He gripped his glass tightly, his knuckles white. 'Round about four o'clock in the morning, four students staggering home drunk from a party found her lying in the snow on Hallow Hill. The official version was that they stumbled on her. She'd been raped and stabbed once in the stomach. But it was a hell of a wound. Deep and long.' Duff's shoulders rose protectively. 'She bled to death.'

He swallowed more beer. Macfadyen waited, tense as a hunting dog on point. He didn't want to say a word and break the spell.

'So that was what happened to my sister. And we wanted to know who did this to her. The police didn't have a clue. See this town? Nobody wants to upset the University. And it was worse back then. They took a look at the four students who found her, but they never really worked them over. Remember these names. Alex Gilbey, Sigmund Malkiewicz, Davey Kerr, Tom Mackie. That's them. And where were they during the missing four hours? They were at some

drunken student party, where nobody keeps tabs on anybody else. Plus, they had access to a Land Rover.'

Macfadyen looked startled. 'That wasn't in anything I read.'

'No, it wouldn't have been. They stole a Land Rover belonging to one of their mates. They were driving about in it that night.'

'Why weren't they charged with it?' Macfadyen demanded.

'Good question. And one we never got an answer to.' He let go of his glass and ticked off the points on his fingers. 'So, they've got no real alibi. They had the perfect vehicle for driving around with a body in a blizzard. They knew Rosie. One of them actually admitted that he'd invited Rosie along to that party. And according to what I was told, the sperm on Rosie's clothes could have come from either Sigmund Malkiewicz, Davey Kerr or Tom Mackie.' He leaned back, worn out by the intensity of his monologue.

'There were no other suspects?'

Duff shrugged. 'There was the mystery boyfriend. But that could easily have been one of those four.'

There was a long silence. Macfadyen was the first to speak. 'I never knew which three the sperm pointed to.'

'It was never public knowledge. But it's kosher, all the same. One of my pals was going out with a lassie that worked for the police. She was a civilian, but she knew what was going on. With what they had on those four, it was criminal how the police just let it slip away.' He finished his pint. 'So, now you know what happened.' He pushed his chair back, as if to leave.

'Wait,' Macfadyen said urgently. 'Just one more thing. Please?'

Duff stood up. 'What?'

'My father. Who was my father?'

'You're better off not knowing, son. He was a waste of space.'

'Even so.' Macfadyen could see the uncertainty in Duff's eyes. He pushed the point. 'Give me my father and you'll never see me again.'

Duff shrugged. 'His name's John Stobie. He moved to England three years before Rosie died.' He turned on his heel and walked.

Macfadyen sat for a while staring into space, ignoring his beer. At last he had a name. Something to start running a trace on. But more than that. He had justification for the decision he'd made after James Lawson's admission of incompetence.

The names of the students hadn't been news to him. He'd known about them for months. When he'd started his search to unearth the whereabouts of the four men he'd convinced himself had destroyed his chance of ever knowing his real mother, he'd been disappointed

to discover that all of them were leading successful, respectable and respected existences. That wasn't any kind of justice.

He'd set up an Internet alert for any information about the four of them. And when Lawson had revealed that the evidence was missing, it had only reinforced Macfadyen's decision that they shouldn't get away with it. If Fife Police couldn't bring them to book for what they'd done, then another way had to be found to make them pay.

The morning after he'd met his uncle, Macfadyen woke early. He hadn't been to work for a week now. He'd gone to the doctor and claimed he was suffering from stress. It wasn't exactly a lie, and he'd been convincing enough to be signed off until after the New Year.

He crawled out of bed and staggered into the bathroom, feeling as if he'd been asleep for minutes instead of hours. He barely glanced in the mirror, not registering the shadows under his eyes or the hollows in his cheeks. He had things to do. Getting to know his mother's killers was more important than remembering to eat properly.

He went through to his computer room. He clicked the mouse on one of the PCs. A flashing message in the corner of the screen said <Mail waiting>. He called up his message screen. Two items. He opened the first. David Kerr had an article in the latest issue of an academic journal. Some tripe about a French writer Macfadyen had never heard of. The next message was far more interesting. It directed him to the web pages of the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*. As he read the article's headline, a slow smile spread across his face.

PROMINENT PEDIATRICIAN DIES IN SUSPICIOUS BLAZE

The words danced before him, leaving him feeling a mixture of exhilaration and frustration. The article read as if Malkiewicz had been some kind of Mother Teresa. Maybe Macfadyen should email the journalist, put him right on a few points.

But that might not be such a bright idea. It would be harder to keep watching the killers if they thought anyone was still interested in what had happened to Rosie Duff. Still, he could find out about the funeral arrangements and make a small point there. It wouldn't hurt to plant the seed of unease in their hearts, to make them start to suffer a little. They'd caused enough suffering over the years.

He checked the time on his computer. If he left now, he'd make it to North Queensferry in time to pick up Alex Gilbey on his way to work. A morning in Edinburgh, and then he'd drive on to Glasgow, to see what David Kerr was up to. But before that, it was time to start searching for John Stobie.

A HUGE YAWN cracked Karen Pirie's jaw as she waited for the buzzer that signalled the door release. When it came, she pushed the door open and trudged across the hall, nodding to the security guard as she passed his office. God, how she hated the evidence storage centre. Christmas Eve, and the rest of the world was girding its loins for the festivities, and where was she? It felt as if her whole life had narrowed to these aisles of archive boxes with their bagged contents telling pathetic stories. There were hundreds of them, and so far she reckoned she'd covered only a quarter. But somewhere in here, she was sure there was the evidence that would open her cold case for her.

She exchanged greetings with the officer on duty and waited while he unlocked the door in the wire cage that enclosed the shelves of boxes. She had started by going through everything from 1978. But that had turned up nothing of interest, apart from a craft knife that belonged to a 1987 case. Then she'd attacked the years on either side. This time, the misfiled item had been a child's shoe, a relic of the unsolved disappearance of a ten-year-old boy in 1969.

She popped the top on a can of Diet Irn-Bru, took a swig and got started: 1980. She dragged herself to the bottom of the stepladder, still sitting where she'd finished with it the day before. She climbed up, pulled out the box she needed and cautiously descended the steps.

Back at the table, she did the paperwork then lifted the lid. It looked like a charity-shop reject pile in there. Laboriously, she took out the bags one by one, checking that none had Rosie Duff's case number on its adhesive label. The final bag appeared to contain a woman's cardigan. Karen lifted it out, and gave the label a cursory glance. Then she blinked, unable to believe her eyes. She dug her notebook out of her bag and compared the case number on the cover with the one on the bag she gripped in her hand. There was no mistake. Karen had found her early Christmas present.

8

January 2004; Scotland

He'd been right. There was a pattern. It had been disrupted by the festive season. But now the New Year was past, the old routine had reasserted itself. The wife went out every Thursday evening. He watched her framed against the light as the front door of the Bearsden villa opened. Moments later, her car headlights came on.

He didn't know where she was going and he didn't care. All that mattered was that she had left her man alone in the house.

He turned up the collar of his jacket against the cold and prepared to wait, his heart fluttering in his chest with anticipation. There was no pleasure in what lay ahead, just necessity. He wasn't some sick thrill killer, after all. Just a man doing what he had to do.

WHEN THE PHONE rang at twenty to midnight, Lynn expected Alex's voice, telling her he was leaving the restaurant where he'd been entertaining a client. She wasn't prepared for the banshee wail that assaulted her as soon as she lifted the receiver. A woman's voice, incoherent but clearly anguished, was all she could make out.

'Who is this?' Lynn demanded, anxious and afraid.

More panicked sobs. Then finally: 'It's me—Hélène. God help me, Lynn, this is terrible, terrible.'

'Hélène? What's the matter? What's happened?'

There was a deep intake of breath. 'It's David. I think he's dead.'

Lynn understood the words, but she couldn't grasp the sense. 'What are you talking about? What's happened?'

'I came home, he's on the kitchen floor, there's blood everywhere and he's not breathing. Lynn, what am I to do? I think he's dead.'

'Have you phoned an ambulance? The police?'

'I called them. They are on their way. But I had to talk to somebody. I'm afraid, Lynn, I am so afraid. I don't understand. This is terrible. He is dead, my David is dead.'

This time, the words penetrated. Lynn felt as if a cold hand was pressing in on her chest, constricting her breathing. 'You don't know that,' she said helplessly.

'He's not breathing, I can't feel a pulse. And there is so much blood. He's dead, Lynn. What am I going to do without him?'

'All this blood—has somebody attacked him?'

'What else could have happened?'

Fear hit Lynn like a cold shower. 'Get out of the house, Hélène. Wait outside for the police. He could still be in the house.'

Hélène screamed. 'Oh my God. You think this is possible?'

'Just get out. Call me when the police are there.'

The line went dead. Lynn lay frozen, unable to process what she'd just gone through. She needed Alex. But Hélène needed him more. In a daze, she speed-dialled his mobile. When he answered she could hear the sounds of a boisterous restaurant in the background.

'Alex,' she said.

'Lynn? Is that you? Is everything OK? You're all right?'

'Alex, you need to go to Mondo's right away. Hélène's just phoned. Something terrible's happened. She says Mondo's dead.'

'What?'

'I know, it's incredible. She says he's lying on the kitchen floor, blood everywhere. Please go there, find out what's going on.'

'OK, OK. I'm on my way. I'll call you as soon as I get there.'

ALEX COULDN'T remember ever having driven faster. It was a miracle that he reached Bearsden without seeing flashing blue lights in his rearview mirror. All the way, he kept telling himself there must be a mistake. His hopes began to disintegrate as soon as he turned into the quiet road where Mondo and Hélène lived. Outside the house, three police cars straggled along the pavement. An ambulance sat in the drive. Alex abandoned his car and ran towards the house.

A uniformed constable stepped into his path at the end of the drive. 'Can I help you, sir?'

'It's my brother-in-law,' Alex said. 'Please, let me through. David Kerr—I'm married to his sister.'

'I'm sorry, sir. Nobody can go in just now. This is a crime scene.'

'What about Hélène? His wife? Where is she? She called my wife.'

'Mrs Kerr is inside. She's perfectly safe, sir.'

'Look, I don't really know what's gone on here, but I do know that Hélène needs support. Can't you radio your boss, get me in?'

The constable put his radio to his mouth, half turned away and muttered something. It crackled in response. After a brief exchange, he swung back to face Alex. 'Can I see some ID, sir?' he asked.

Alex handed over his driver's licence. The policeman looked at it and handed it back with a polite nod. 'If you'd like to go to the house, sir, one of my colleagues from CID will meet you at the door.'

Alex brushed past him. As he reached the door, it swung open and a woman in her thirties swept tired, cynical eyes over him.

'Mr Gilbey?' She stepped back to allow him to enter the vestibule.

'That's right. What's happened? Hélène phoned my wife, she seemed to think David Kerr was dead.'

The woman nodded. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you that Mr Kerr has been pronounced dead.'

'I don't understand. What happened?'

'It appears he was stabbed. There are signs of a break-in. But you'll appreciate, we can't say much at this stage.'

Alex rubbed his hands over his face. 'This is terrible. Christ, what a

thing to happen.' He shook his head, numb and bewildered. 'It feels unreal.' He took a deep breath. He'd deal with his reactions later. This wasn't why Lynn had asked him to come. 'Where's Hélène?'

The woman opened the inside door. 'She's in the living room.'

Hélène was sitting on the edge of one of the sofas, hunched into herself like an old woman. As he entered she looked up, her eyes swollen pools of misery. 'Alex,' she said, her voice cracked and strained.

He crossed to her side, sitting down and putting his arms round her. 'I'm so sorry,' he said.

Hélène leaned into him, exhausted by grief. Alex was suddenly aware that a uniformed woman constable was sitting in the corner.

'I feel as if I'm in some terrible dream. And I just want to wake up,' Hélène said wearily.

'I can't believe it either.'

'He was just lying there,' Hélène said softly. 'Blood all over him. I touched his neck, to see if there was a pulse. But you know, I was so careful not to get his blood on me. Isn't that terrible? He was lying there dead and all I could think about was how they turned you four into suspects just because you tried to help a dying girl.'

Alex squeezed her shoulder. 'It's understandable. Knowing what we know. But nobody could think this had anything to do with you.'

Hélène made a harsh sound in the back of her throat and glanced up at the policewoman. '*On parle français, oui?*'

What the hell was this? '*Ça va*,' Alex replied, wondering if his holiday French was up to it. '*Mais lentement*.'

'I'll keep it simple,' she said in French. 'I need your advice. There is something that will make me look bad. Once a week, I went out alone. David thought I met some French friends.' She squeezed the tissue in her hand into a tight ball. 'I lied to him, Alex. I have a lover.'

'Ah,' Alex said. It felt too much, on top of the news the night had already brought. He didn't want to be Hélène's confidant.

'I loved him, you know? But he was very needy. A while back, I met this woman. I didn't mean for it to turn out the way it did, but we became lovers. I was with her this evening. If the police find out, they will think, ah, she has a lover, they must be in it together. But Jackie was no threat to my marriage. I didn't stop loving David just because I was sleeping with someone else. So should I tell the truth? Or should I keep quiet and hope they don't find out?'

Alex struggled to find the French words. 'I think you have to tell the truth. Because if they find it out later, it will look much worse.'

Before Hélène could answer, Alex's mobile chirped in his pocket.

'That'll be Lynn,' he said in English. 'Hello?'

'Alex?' Lynn sounded terrified.

'I'm here at the house,' he said. 'I don't know how to tell you this. Hélène was right. Mondo's dead. It looks like somebody broke in—'

'Alex,' Lynn interrupted him. 'I'm in labour. The contractions started just after we spoke before. The taxi should be here any minute.'

'What . . . what . . .?'

'Just get yourself to the Simpson. I'll meet you in the labour suite.'

'But, Lynn, it's too soon.' Alex finally managed sense.

'It's the shock, Alex. It happens. I'm fine. Please, don't be scared. I need you to drive very carefully to Edinburgh. I'll see you soon.'

The connection broke and Alex looked helplessly at Hélène.

'She's in labour,' she said flatly. 'So go.'

'You shouldn't be alone.'

'I have a friend I can call. You need to be with Lynn.'

'I'll phone,' Alex said. 'I'll come back when I can.'

He ran from the room.

ALEX ABANDONED the car in the Royal Infirmary car park and somehow managed to find the maternity wing, where the receptionist directed him to the delivery suite. A nurse took him to Lynn's room. When the door opened, Alex was confronted with a scene that bore no relationship to the routines they'd practised at the antenatal classes. Three women in surgical scrubs bustled around. A monitor with an electronic display sat next to the bed, a fourth woman in a white coat studying it. Lynn lay on her back, legs apart, her hair plastered to her head with sweat. Her face was scarlet and damp, her eyes wide and anguished.

'You're here,' she gasped. 'Alex, I'm scared.'

He rushed to her side, reaching for her hand. She gripped him tightly. 'I love you,' he said. 'You're doing just fine.'

The woman in the white coat glanced across. 'Hi, I'm Dr Singh,' she said, acknowledging Alex's arrival.

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity. 'Baby's stuck,' one of the midwives said.

Dr Singh studied the monitor briefly. 'Heart rate's down,' she said.

Everything began to happen more quickly than Alex could comprehend as he clung to Lynn's clammy hand. Odd phrases penetrated. 'Get her to theatre now.' 'Catheterise her.' 'Consent form.' Then the bed was on the move, the door open, everyone bustling down the corridor towards the theatre.

The world turned into a blur of activity. Time seemed alternately to race and to crawl. Then, when Alex had almost stopped hoping, the magic words, 'It's a girl. You've got a daughter.'

Tears welled up in his eyes and he swung round to see his child. Blood-streaked and purple, frighteningly still and silent. 'Oh God,' he said. 'Lynn, it's a girl.' But Lynn was past noticing.

A midwife hastily wrapped the baby in a blanket and hurried off.

Alex stood up. 'Is she OK?' He was led out of the theatre in a daze.

The midwife smiled. 'Your daughter's doing great. You should be able to go down to the neonatal unit and see her in a wee while.'

'What about Lynn?' he asked.

'They're just stitching her up now. She's had a rough time. When they bring her through, she'll be tired and disorientated. So you'll need to be strong for her.'

He sat with Lynn until she woke, then told her about their miraculous daughter. Pale and exhausted, Lynn wept.

'I know we agreed we were going to call her Ella,' she said, 'but I want to call her Davina. After Mondo.'

JAMES LAWSON heard the news of David Kerr's death as he drove to work the following morning. He couldn't resist a grim smile of satisfaction as it sank in. It had been a long time coming, but finally Barney Maclennan's killer had got what he deserved. Then his thoughts turned uneasily to Robin and the motive he'd handed him. He reached for the carphone. As soon as he arrived at headquarters, he made for the cold cases squad room. Luckily Robin Maclennan was the only one in. He was standing by the coffee maker.

The noise of the machine covered Lawson's approach, and Robin jumped when his boss said abruptly, 'Did you hear the news? Davey Kerr's been murdered.' Lawson narrowed his eyes as he scrutinised the detective inspector. 'Last night. In his home.'

Robin's eyebrows rose. 'You're kidding.'

'I heard it on the radio. I phoned Glasgow to double-check it was our David Kerr, and lo and behold, it was.'

'What happened?' Robin spooned sugar into a mug.

'At first glance, it looked like a burglary gone sour. But then they realised he had two stab wounds. Now, your average panicking burglar might strike once with a knife, but then he's going to leg it. This one made sure Davey Kerr wasn't going to stick around to tell tales.'

'So what are you saying?' Robin asked, reaching for the coffee.

'It's not what I'm saying, it's what Strathclyde Police are saying.

They're looking at other possibilities. As they put it.' Lawson waited, but Robin said nothing. 'Where were you last night, Robin?'

Robin glared angrily at Lawson. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Calm down, man. I'm not accusing you of anything. But let's face it, if anybody has a motive for killing Davey Kerr, it's you. Now, I know you wouldn't do something like that. I'm on your side. I'm just making sure you're covered, that's all.' He put a reassuring hand on Robin's arm. 'Are you covered?'

Robin ran a hand through his hair. 'Christ, no. It was Diane's mother's birthday and she took the kids across to Grangemouth. They didn't get back till gone eleven. So I was home alone. Shit. I'm screwed if they get a whisper about what Kerr did to Barney.'

Lawson poured himself a coffee. 'They won't hear it from me.'

'You know what this business is like. It's bound to get out. They'll unravel Kerr's past, and somebody will remember my brother died saving him after a stupid suicide attempt.'

'Tell you what. Anybody from Strathclyde asks, you were with me.'

Robin looked shocked. 'You're going to lie for me?'

'We're both going to lie. Because we both know you had nothing to do with Davey Kerr's death. Look at it this way. We're saving police time. This way, they're not going to expend time and energy looking at you when they should be looking for the killer.'

Reluctantly, Robin nodded. 'I suppose so. But . . .'

'Robin, you're a good cop. You're a good man. I wouldn't have you on my team otherwise. I believe in you and I don't want your good name dragged through the mud.'

'Thanks, sir. I appreciate your confidence.'

'Think nothing of it. Let's just agree that I came round to your house and we had a couple of beers and a few hands of poker. You won about twenty quid off me and I left around eleven. How's that?'

'Fine.'

Lawson smiled, chinked his mug against Robin's and walked away. That was the mark of leadership, he believed. Figure out what your team needs and deliver it before they even knew they needed it.

THAT EVENING, Alex was on the road again, heading back to Glasgow. He'd eventually made it home, where the phone was ringing off the hook. He'd spoken to both sets of grandparents. His parents had seemed embarrassed to be so thrilled, in the light of what had happened in Glasgow. Lynn's mother and father had been devastated by their son's death. It was far too soon for them to take any

consolation from the birth of their first grandchild. Alex had emailed their friends and workmates a simple announcement of Davina's birth, then unplugged the phone and crashed out.

When he woke, he'd headed back to Edinburgh. He'd found Lynn down in the neonatal unit gazing happily at their child.

'She's so tiny, Alex. So precious.' Lynn had flashed a look of anxiety at him. 'She's going to be OK, isn't she?'

'Of course she is.' They'd held hands, willing him to be right.

Alex knew he couldn't stay cocooned in the delights of new parenthood for ever. When the auxiliary brought Lynn her evening meal, he'd got to his feet. 'I should go back to Glasgow,' he said. 'I need to make sure Hélène's OK. She might need some help.'

Lynn looked up at him, tears glistening in her eyes. 'Poor Hélène. I can't imagine what it must be like. When I think how I'd feel if anything happened to you or Davina—'

'Nothing's going to happen to me. Or to Davina. I promise you.'

Alex thought of that promise now as he covered the miles between joy and sorrow. As he approached Glasgow, he rang Hélène.

The answering machine redirected him to her mobile, which she answered on the second ring. 'Alex? How is Lynn? What's happened?'

He was surprised. He'd always considered Hélène to be too obsessed by her own concerns to care about anyone other than herself and Mondo. 'We've got a daughter. With her being premature, they've got her in an incubator. But she's doing great.'

'How is Lynn?'

'Hurting. In every sense. But she's OK. And you? How are you?'

'Not good. But I'm coping, I guess.'

'Listen, I'm on my way to see you. Where are you?'

'The house is still a crime scene, apparently. I can't go back till tomorrow. I'm staying with my friend, Jackie. She lives in the Merchant City. Do you want to come here?'

Alex really didn't want to face the woman Hélène had betrayed Mondo with. He thought about suggesting neutral ground, but it felt heartless in the circumstances. 'Give me directions,' he said.

The flat was easy to find. It occupied half the second floor of a converted warehouse. The woman who opened the door couldn't have looked less like Hélène. Her jeans were old and faded with rips at the knees, and her T-shirt proclaimed she was 100% Grrrrl. Her short dark hair was spiked with gel and the look she gave him was every bit as barbed. Dark eyebrows were drawn down over pale blue-grey eyes and there was no welcoming smile on her wide mouth.

'You must be Alex,' she said. 'Come in.'

Alex followed her into the sitting area of the apartment. Hélène was curled in the corner of a tapestry sofa. He crossed the polished wood floor to his sister-in-law, who raised her face for their customary exchange of air kisses. Her eyes were puffy and shadowed, but other than that, Hélène seemed back in command of herself.

'I appreciate you coming when you should be enjoying your new baby,' she said.

'She's still in neonatal care. And Lynn's exhausted. I thought I might be more use over here. But . . .' He gave Jackie a smile. 'I see you're being well looked after.'

Jackie shrugged, the hostile expression never wavering. 'I'm a freelance journalist, so I can be a bit flexible about my hours.'

Alex perched on the far end of the sofa from Hélène. 'How are you doing?'

Her eyelids fluttered. 'I try not to feel anything. I don't want to think about David, because when I do my heart feels like it's breaking. But I need to get through this without cracking up. The police are being horrible, Alex. That dull-looking girl in the corner last night? You remember?'

'The policewoman?'

'Yes.' Hélène gave a snort of derision. 'It turns out she did French at school. She understood our little conversation last night.'

'Oh shit.'

'The detective in charge was here this morning. He asked about Jackie and me. So I told him the truth. He was polite, but I could see he is suspicious.'

'Did you ask what had happened to Mondo?'

'Of course.' Her face tightened in pain. 'He said the glass in the kitchen door was broken, maybe from a burglar. But they haven't found any fingerprints. The knife that was used to stab David was from the knife block in the kitchen. He said that, on the surface, it looks as if David heard a noise and came down to investigate. But he stressed those words, Alex. On the surface.'

'Neanderthals,' Jackie said. 'The wife has a lover, therefore the wife or lover must want to get rid of the husband.'

'I suppose they've got nothing else to go on,' he said.

'But I am the victim here, not the criminal,' Hélène said bitterly. 'I didn't do anything to harm David. But it's impossible to prove a negative. You know how difficult it is to dispel suspicion once the finger points. It drove David so crazy he tried to kill himself.'

Alex shivered at the memory. 'It's not going to come to that.'

'Damn right, it's not,' Jackie said. 'I'm going to talk to a lawyer in the morning. I'm not standing for this.'

Hélène looked worried. 'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

'Why not?' Jackie demanded.

'Aren't you supposed to tell your lawyer everything?' Hélène gave Alex a strange sideways look.

'It's protected by lawyer–client privilege,' Jackie said.

'What's the problem?' Alex demanded. 'Is there something you're not telling me, Hélène?'

'Jackie, tell him,' Hélène said. 'Otherwise he'll go away thinking we've really got something to hide.'

Jackie glared at Alex. 'I had to go out for about an hour last night. I was out of dope and we wanted a joint. My dealer's not the sort of guy to give alibis. And even if he did, the police wouldn't believe him. So, technically, either one of us could have killed David.'

'You should tell the police,' Alex said. 'If they find out you've lied, then they're never going to believe you're innocent.'

'Unlike you, you mean?' Jackie challenged him contemptuously.

Alex didn't like the undercurrent of hostility swirling around him. 'I came to help, not to be a whipping boy,' he said sharply. 'I'd better be getting back. I'll see you at the funeral.'

ACC Lawson pulled the folder across the desk towards him. 'I had high hopes of this,' he sighed.

'Me too, sir,' Karen Pirie admitted. 'I know they didn't pick up any biological samples from the cardigan at the time, but I thought with the sophisticated equipment they've got now there might be a trace of something we could use. Semen or blood. But there's nothing, except those funny drops of paint.'

'Which we knew about at the time. And it didn't take us any further forward then.' Lawson flipped open the folder and skimmed the short report. 'The problem was that the cardigan wasn't found with the body. If my memory serves me, it was in somebody's garden?'

Karen nodded. 'Number fifteen. They didn't find it till more than a week had gone past. It was identified by Rosie Duff's mother as the one she was wearing when she went out that night.'

'So that's that, then? The physical evidence relating to Rosie Duff's murder has disappeared without trace?'

'So it would seem. The last person to access the box was DI Maclennan, a week before he died.'

Lawson bridled. 'You're not suggesting Barney Maclennan removed evidence from a live murder case?'

'That's not what I meant at all, sir. I just meant that, whatever had happened to Rosie Duff's clothes, there's no official paper trail.'

He sighed again. 'It likely happened years ago. They'll have ended up in the bucket. Honest to God, you have to wonder sometimes. Some of the people we get working for us . . .'

'I suppose the other option is that the DI sent them off for further testing, and either they never came back because he wasn't there to chase it up, or the package disappeared into a black hole because DI Maclennan wasn't there to take delivery,' Karen suggested.

'I suppose it's a possibility. But, either way, you're not going to find it now.' Lawson drummed his fingers on the desk. 'Well, that's that, then. One cold case that's going to stay in the deep freeze.'

'You don't think it's worth me having another crack at the witnesses? The four students?'

Lawson grimaced. 'You'll have a job.'

'How do you mean, sir?'

Lawson opened his desk drawer and produced a three-day-old copy of the *Scotsman.* It was folded open at the death notices. He pushed it towards her, his finger stabbing the newsprint.

> KERR, DAVID. The death is announced of Dr David Kerr, of Bearsden, Glasgow. The funeral will take place on Thursday at 2 p.m. at Glasgow Crematorium.

Karen looked up, surprised. 'He couldn't have been more than forty-six, forty-seven? That's pretty young to be dying.'

'You should pay more attention to the news, Karen. The Glasgow University lecturer stabbed by a burglar last Thursday night?'

'That was *our* David Kerr? The one they called Mondo?'

Lawson nodded. 'So, do you fancy a run out to Glasgow this afternoon? We could pay our last respects to one of our suspects.'

'You think the other three will turn up?'

Lawson shrugged. 'We'll just have to see, won't we? But I don't think we'll be conducting any interviews today. Let it lie for a wee while. We don't want to be accused of insensitivity, do we?'

IT WAS STANDING ROOM only at the crematorium. Mondo might have cut himself off from family and old friends, but it looked as if he hadn't had any problem finding replacements. Alex sat in the front pew, Lynn huddled beside him. Two days out of hospital, she was

still moving like an old woman. He had tried to persuade her to stay at home and rest, but she'd been adamant that she couldn't miss her only brother's funeral. Besides, she'd argued, with no baby at home to care for, she would only sit around and brood.

Hélène sat farther along the pew, head bowed, shoulders hunched. She looked as if she'd closed in on herself, placing an impenetrable barrier between herself and the rest of the world. At least she'd had the good sense not to arrive at the funeral on Jackie's arm.

The sonorous opening of the Crimond setting of the Twenty-third Psalm brought a lump to Alex's throat. Then the heavy curtains slid open and the coffin began its final journey. The minister intoned the blessing, then led the way down the aisle. The family followed, Alex bringing up the rear with Lynn. Most of the faces were a blur, but, halfway down, Weird's lanky frame leapt out at him. They acknowledged each other with a brief nod, then Alex was past, heading for the doors. He had his second surprise, just as he was leaving, when he noticed James Lawson in the congregation. Bad taste, Alex thought, taking up his station at the end of the meeting-and-greeting line.

Weird hung back almost to the end. He embraced Lynn gently then shook Alex's hand, placing his other hand on Alex's elbow. 'I'll wait outside.' Alex nodded.

At last, the final mourners trickled out. Funny, thought Alex. No Lawson. He must have left by another door. Alex ushered his in-laws to the funeral car, handed Lynn into her seat, then said, 'I'll see you back at the hotel. I just need to make sure everything's sorted here.'

The car swept off down the drive. He'd left his own car here earlier, wanting to make sure he had his own wheels in case anything needed his attention in the immediate aftermath of the service.

A hand on his shoulder made him spin round. 'Oh, it's you,' he said, almost laughing with relief as he saw it was Weird.

'Who else were you expecting?'

'Well, Jimmy Lawson was lurking at the back,' Alex said.

'Jimmy Lawson the cop?'

'Assistant Chief Constable James Lawson, to you,' Alex said, moving towards the area where flowers were displayed.

'So what was he doing here?'

'I don't know. He's in charge of the cold case review. Maybe he wanted to check out his prime suspects, see if we were going to get overcome with emotion and fall to our knees and confess.'

Weird pulled a face. 'I never liked all that Catholic stuff. We should be adult enough to come to terms with our own guilt. It's not God's

job to wipe the slate clean so we can go and sin again.' He stopped and turned to face Alex. 'I wanted to tell you how pleased I am that Lynn was safely delivered of your baby daughter.'

'Thanks, Tom,' Alex said.

'Is the baby still in hospital?'

Alex sighed. 'She's a wee bit jaundiced, so they're keeping her in for a few days. It's hard for Lynn, having to deal with all this.'

They walked on, glancing at the floral tributes. One of the mourners came over, asking Alex for directions to the hotel where the buffet was taking place. When he veered back towards Weird, Alex saw his friend crouching over one of the wreaths. Once he was close enough to see what had attracted Weird's attention, his heart jumped in his chest. It was indistinguishable from the wreath they'd seen in Seattle: a neat, tight circlet of white roses and rosemary.

Weird detached the card and stood up. 'The same message,' he said, handing it to Alex. 'Rosemary for remembrance.'

Alex felt his skin turn clammy. 'I don't like this.'

'You and me both. This is too much of a coincidence, Alex. Ziggy and Mondo both die in suspicious circumstances . . . Hell, no, Ziggy and Mondo both get murdered. And the identical wreath turns up at both funerals. With a message that ties us to the unsolved murder of a girl called Rosemary.'

'That was twenty-five years ago. If anybody was going to take revenge, surely they'd have done it a long time ago?' Alex said.

Weird shook his head. 'Twenty-five years ago, everybody was watching. I haven't forgotten the time I got done over. I haven't forgotten the night they dropped Ziggy down the Bottle Dungeon. The only reason it all stopped was because the cops gave Colin and Brian Duff the hard word. So maybe they decided to wait.'

'But twenty-five years?'

'We don't know what's happened in their lives. Maybe something came up that set all this off again. Maybe the cold case review reminded them they had a score to settle. I don't know. All I do know is that this looks very like somebody's out to get us.'

'So what do you suggest we do about it?'

'I plan to get on a plane tomorrow and head back to the States. Then I plan to send my wife and kids somewhere safe.'

'What about you?'

Weird gave the old, familiar wolfish grin. 'I'm going on retreat. Ministers have to go into the wilderness from time to time to re-establish contact with their spirituality. So that's what I'll be doing.'

'You can't hide for ever, though. Sooner or later, you're going to have to go home.'

'I know that. But I'm not going to sit on my hands. As soon as I get myself and my family out of the firing line, I'm going to hire a private detective and find out just who sent that wreath to Ziggy's funeral. Because when I know that, I'll know who I have to look out for.' Weird put a hand on Alex's arm. 'I suggest you do the same.' He pulled Alex into a hug. 'Take care of yourself.'

'Very bloody touching,' a voice said harshly.

Weird pulled away and swung round. At first he couldn't place the grim-faced man glowering at him and Alex. Then memory erased the years and he was back outside the Lammas Bar, terrified and hurting. 'Brian Duff,' Weird breathed.

Alex glanced from one to the other. 'This is Rosie's brother?'

'Aye, that's right.'

The confused emotions that had been tormenting Alex for days suddenly fused into anger. 'Come to gloat, have you?'

'Poetic justice, isn't that what they call it? One murderous wee shite sees off another one. Aye, I came to gloat.'

Alex lunged forward, stopped short by Weird's firm grip on his arm.

'Leave it, Alex. Brian, none of us harmed a hair on Rosie's head. I know you need somebody to blame, but it wasn't one of us.'

Brian Duff spat on the ground. 'I really hoped that the cops were going to nail one of you this time round. Since that's not going to happen, this is the next best thing.'

'Of course it's not going to happen. We never touched your sister, and the DNA evidence will prove that,' Alex shouted.

Duff snorted. 'What DNA evidence? Those idiots have lost the DNA evidence.'

Alex's mouth fell open. 'What?' he whispered.

'You heard. So you're still safe from the long arm of the law.' His lip curled in a sneer. 'Didnae save your pal, though, did it?' He turned on his heel and strode off without a backward glance.

DAVINA WAS MAKING progress, the nurse told them. While he held her in his arms, Alex could forget the depression Mondo's funeral had trailed in its wake, and the anxieties Weird's reaction to the wreath had generated. The only thing that could be better than sitting with his wife and daughter in the neonatal unit would be doing the same in their own living room. Or so he'd thought until his conversation at the crematorium.

As if she read his mind, Lynn looked up from feeding. 'Just a couple of days now, and we'll be bringing her home.'

Alex smiled, hiding the uneasiness her words created. 'I can't wait.'

Driving home afterwards, he thought about broaching the subject of the wreath and Brian Duff's revelation. But he didn't want to unsettle Lynn, so he kept quiet. Lynn went straight to bed, exhausted by the day, while Alex opened a bottle of Shiraz. He brought the wine through to the bedroom and poured them each a glass.

'Are you going to tell me what's eating away at you?' Lynn asked as he climbed on top of the duvet next to her.

And so he told her about the funeral wreaths, making as light of it as he could. To his surprise, Lynn made no attempt to dismiss the story as Weird's paranoia.

'I don't like this one bit,' she said. 'Weird's right to take this seriously. You've got to do something, Alex. You can't take risks, not with Davina coming home any day now.'

'What am I supposed to do? Go into hiding with you and Davina? Where would we go? And what about the business? I can't just walk away from my livelihood, not with a child to support.'

Lynn stroked his head. 'Alex, take it easy. I'm not suggesting we jump off the deep end like Weird. You told me earlier that Lawson was at the funeral today. Why don't you go and talk to him?'

Alex snorted. 'Lawson? The man who tried to con me with lentil soup and sympathy? You think he's going to give me a sympathetic hearing?'

'Lawson might have had his suspicions, but at least he stopped you getting a kicking.'

'He'd laugh in my face.'

'Alternatively, he might take you seriously enough to make some inquiries. It's not in his interest to turn a blind eye to vigilante justice, if that's what this is. Apart from anything else, it makes the police look even more crap than they already do.'

'You don't know the half of it,' Alex said.

'What do you mean?'

'Something else happened after the funeral. Rosie Duff's brother turned up. He made sure Weird and I knew he'd come to gloat.'

Lynn looked shocked. 'Oh, Alex. That's awful. For all of you. That poor man. Not to be able to let it rest after all this time.'

'That's not all. He told us that Fife Police have lost the evidence in Rosie's case. The evidence that we were relying on to produce the DNA that would clear us.'

'You're kidding.'

'I wish I was.'

'All the more reason why you need to talk to Lawson.'

'You think he wants me rubbing his nose in it?'

'I don't care what Lawson wants. You need to know for sure what's going on. If there really is someone after you, it might be the realisation that they're not going to get justice after all that has set them off. Call Lawson in the morning. It would put my mind at rest.'

Alex rolled off the bed and started to undress. 'If that's what it takes, consider it done.'

TO ALEX'S SURPRISE, when he had called to arrange a meeting with ACC Lawson, the secretary had given him a slot that afternoon.

The empty office he was shown into was about twice the size of his own. He took in the big desk, the elaborately framed map of the county and James Lawson's prominently displayed commendations. He sat down in the visitor's chair.

He wasn't kept waiting long. The door behind him opened and Alex jumped up. The years hadn't been kind to Lawson, he thought. His skin was lined and weathered, with two patches of high colour on his cheeks. His eyes were still shrewd, however, Alex noted as Lawson took him in from top to toe.

'Mr Gilbey,' he said. 'Sorry to keep you.'

'No problem. I appreciate you fitting me in so quickly.'

Lawson swept past without offering his hand. 'I'm always interested when someone connected with an investigation wants to see me.' He settled into his leather chair.

'I saw you at David Kerr's funeral,' Alex said.

'I had business over in Glasgow. I took the opportunity to pay my last respects.'

'I didn't think Fife Police had much respect for Mondo,' Alex said.

Lawson made an impatient gesture with one hand. 'Is your visit connected to our reopening of the Rosemary Duff murder?'

'Yes. How is the inquiry going? Have you made any progress?'

Lawson looked irritated. 'I can't discuss operational matters relating to an ongoing case with someone in your position.'

'What position is that, exactly?'

Lawson shuffled some papers on his desk. 'You were a witness.'

'And witnesses can't be told what's happening? You're quick enough to talk to the press when you make progress. Why do I have less rights than a journalist?'

'I'm not talking to the press about the Rosie Duff case either.'

'Would that be because you've lost the evidence?'

Lawson gave him a long, hard stare. 'No comment,' he said.

Alex shook his head. 'That's not good enough. After what we went through twenty-five years ago, I think I deserve better than that. Rosie Duff wasn't the only victim back then, and you know it. Maybe it's time I went to the press and told them how Fife Police have screwed up their review of Rosie Duff's murder by losing the crucial evidence that would have exonerated me and might just have led to the arrest of the real killer.'

'I don't respond well to intimidation, Mr Gilbey.'

'Neither do I. You really want to see yourself all over the papers as the copper who invaded a grieving family's last farewell to their murdered son? The same son whose innocence was still in doubt, thanks to the incompetence of you and your team?'

'There's no need for you to take this attitude,' Lawson said.

'Oh no? I think there's every need. You're supposed to be conducting a cold case review here. I'm a key witness. I'm the person who found the body. And yet there's not been a single officer from Fife Police in touch with me. That doesn't exactly smack of zeal, does it? And now I discover you can't even keep a bag of evidence safe.'

'Mr Gilbey, it's true there's a problem with the evidence in this case. At some point in the past twenty-five years, Rosie Duff's clothes have gone missing. We're trying to track them down, but so far, all we've been able to find is the cardigan that was found some distance away from the crime scene. And that had no biological material on it. None of the clothes that might have been susceptible to modern forensics are available to us. So at the moment, we're stymied. Actually, the officer in charge of the case wanted to have a chat with you. Perhaps we can arrange that soon?'

'Jesus Christ,' Alex said. 'You really don't get it, do you? We're still twisting in the breeze. Do you realise two of the four of us have been murdered in the past month?'

Lawson raised his eyebrows. 'Two of you?'

'Ziggy Malkiewicz also died in suspicious circumstances. Just before Christmas.'

Lawson pulled a pad towards him and unscrewed a fountain pen. 'This is news to me. Where did this happen?'

'In Seattle, where he'd been living for the past dozen years.'

'I'm sorry to hear about Mr Malkiewicz. But I don't see why you should think these two deaths are connected to Rosie Duff's murder.'

Alex explained about the wreaths once more.

Lawson sighed. 'I understand why you're reacting like this. But I don't believe that someone has embarked on a deliberate programme of revenge against the four of you. I can tell you that the police in Glasgow are pursuing promising lines of inquiry that have nothing to do with Rosie Duff's murder. Coincidences do happen, and that's what these two deaths are. People don't do that kind of thing, Mr Gilbey. They certainly don't wait twenty-five years to do it.'

'What about Rosie's brothers? They were pretty keen to take a pop at us back then. Brian Duff turned up at Mondo's funeral to taunt us.'

'I don't think you've anything to fear from the Duffs. I saw Brian myself a few weeks ago. I don't think vengeance was on his mind. And Colin works out in the Gulf. He wasn't in the country when David Kerr died. I think you can rest easy on that score.'

'So that kind of disposes of the suspects.'

'Not quite,' Lawson said softly.

'What do you mean?' Alex asked.

Lawson looked guilty, as if he'd said too much. 'Ignore me, I was just thinking aloud.'

'Wait a minute. You can't brush me off like that. What did you mean, "not quite"?'

Lawson took a deep breath. 'Rosie's son,' he said.

9

Lynn stared at Alex, never pausing in her gentle rocking of her daughter. 'Say again,' she commanded.

'Rosie had a son. According to Lawson, he was adopted. He decided last year to track down his birth mother.' Alex leaned forward. 'Can I take her for a while?'

'Sure.' Lynn passed their daughter to Alex. 'So, does Lawson think the son is coming after you?'

Alex held Davina to his chest. She mumbled softly, then settled. 'Lawson doesn't think anybody's coming after me,' Alex said. 'He thinks I'm paranoid. He got very embarrassed about having let slip about Rosie's son, and kept reassuring me he wouldn't harm a fly. He's called Graham, by the way. Lawson wouldn't give me his surname. Apparently he works in the IT industry. Quiet, stable, very normal.'

Lynn shook her head. 'I can't believe Lawson's taking it all so lightly. Who does he think sent the wreaths?'

'He doesn't know and he doesn't care. All he's bothered about is that his precious cold case review is going down the drain.'

'Did he explain how they lost a whole box of forensic evidence?'

'They didn't lose the whole box. They've still got the cardigan. Apparently it was found separately. Thrown over the wall into somebody's garden. They tested it after all the other stuff, which is probably why it ended up separated from the rest of the material.'

Lynn frowned. 'It turned up later? Wasn't there something about a second search they did later at your house?'

Alex struggled with memory. 'After they'd done the initial search . . . They came back after the New Year. They scraped paint off the walls and ceilings. And they wanted to know whether we'd done any redecorating.' He snorted. 'As if. And Mondo said he'd overheard one of them talking about a cardigan. They must have been referring to Rosie's cardigan,' he finished triumphantly.

'So there must have been paint on her cardigan,' Lynn said thoughtfully. 'That's why they were taking samples.'

'Yeah, but they obviously didn't get a match from our house. Or else we'd have been in even deeper shit.'

'I wonder if they've done a fresh analysis. Did Lawson say anything about it?'

'Not specifically. He said they didn't have any of the clothes that would be susceptible to modern forensic analysis.'

'That's nonsense. They can do so much with paint these days. I get far more information from the labs now than I did even three or four years ago. They should be testing that. You need to get back to Lawson and insist that they look again at it.'

'An analysis isn't any use without something to compare it with. Lynn, if there was anything to be gained, they'd have done it.'

'Christ, Alex, are you just going to sit back and wait for something else to blow up in the middle of our lives? My brother's dead. I don't want you to die, Alex. I don't want your daughter to grow up without a single memory of you.'

'You think I want that?' Alex hugged his daughter to his chest.

'Stop being so spineless, then. If you and Weird are right, the person who killed Ziggy and Mondo is going to come after you. The only way you're going to get off the hook is if Rosie's killer is finally exposed. If Lawson won't do it, maybe you should give it a try.'

'I'm a greetings card manufacturer, Lynn, not a detective.'

Lynn glared at him. 'And how often have miscarriages of justice been overturned because some punter wouldn't stop digging?'

'I haven't got a clue where to start.'

'Do you remember that series about forensic science on the telly a couple of years back? I remember one of the forensic scientists saying how they often leave stuff out of their reports. Trace evidence that can't be analysed, that sort of thing. If it's not going to be of any use to the detectives, they don't bother including it.'

'I don't see where that gets us. Even if we could get our hands on the original reports, we wouldn't know what was left out, would we?'

'No. But if we tracked down the scientist who put it together in the first place, he might remember something that meant nothing at the time but means something now. He might even have kept his notes.'

'You think if I ring up Lawson and ask him who did the forensic report, he's going to tell me?'

'Of course he's not. But he'd tell a journalist, wouldn't he?'

'The only journalists I know are the ones who write lifestyle features for the Sunday supplements,' Alex protested.

'Well, ring round and ask them to find one of their colleagues who can help.'

When Lynn was in this kind of mood there was no point in arguing with her, Alex knew. As he resigned himself to creeping round his contacts, the glimmer of an idea came into his mind.

JACKIE GLOWERED at Alex. 'She's not here.'

'I know. It's you I wanted to see.'

She snorted, arms folded across her chest. Today, she was dressed in leather jeans and a tight black T-shirt. 'Warning me off, eh?'

'What makes you think that's any of my business?' Alex said coolly.

She raised her eyebrows. 'You're Scottish, your male, she belongs to your family.'

Exasperated, Alex turned to go. 'I'm wasting my time here. I just thought you might appreciate a suggestion that could get you off the hook with the police.'

'Why are you offering me a way out?'

'Because it also offers me peace of mind.'

'Even if you do think I might have killed Mondo.'

Alex grunted. 'Believe me, I'd sleep a lot easier in my bed at night if I believed that.'

'Because then the dyke would have got what she deserved?'

Irritated, Alex snapped, 'Could you put your prejudices away for

five minutes? The only reason I'd be glad if you'd killed Mondo is that it would mean I was safe.'

Jackie tilted her head to one side, intrigued in spite of herself. 'That's a very strange thing to say.' She stepped back. 'You'd better come in. What do you mean, "safe"?'

Alex walked to the nearest chair and sat down. 'Another friend of mine was killed in suspicious circumstances a few weeks ago.'

Jackie nodded. 'Hélène mentioned it. This was someone you and David were at university with, right?'

'We were best friends. One night, coming home from a party, we stumbled over a young woman—'

'I know about that, too,' Jackie interrupted.

'Right. So you know the background. Now, I know this is going to sound crazy, but I think the reason Mondo and Ziggy are dead is that someone is taking revenge for Rosie Duff. That's the girl that died,' he added.

'Why?' In spite of herself, Jackie was all attention now. The whiff of a good story was powerful enough to put her hostility on hold.

Alex told her about the wreaths. 'Her full name was Rosemary.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'That's creepy,' she said. 'I've never come across a wreath like that. It's hard to interpret it except as a reference to this woman. I can see why it would do your head in.'

'The police couldn't. They acted like I was a little old lady afraid of the dark.'

'Well, we both know how smart the police are. So what is it you think I can do?'

'If we could find out who really killed Rosie, then whoever is taking it out on us will see they have to stop.'

'It makes sense. Can't you persuade the police to reopen the case?'

'It's already been reopened. Fife Police are doing a review of cold cases, and this is one of them. But they've lost the evidence. Lynn has this idea that if we can track down the forensic scientist who did the original report, he might be able to tell us more than he put in it.'

Jackie nodded. 'Sometimes they leave things out to avoid giving the defence any leverage. So you want me to track this guy down?'

'Something like that. I thought you might be able to pretend you were going to do an in-depth feature on the case, focusing on the original investigation. Maybe you could persuade the police to give you access to material they wouldn't readily show me?'

She shrugged. 'It's worth a try.'

'Then you'll do it?'

'I'll be honest with you, Alex. I can't say I've got any great interest in saving your skin. But you're right. Helping you find who killed David gets me off the hook. So, who should I speak to?'

THE MESSAGE on James Lawson's desk simply said: *The cold case team would like to see you asap*. It didn't sound like news of disaster. He walked into the squad room with an air of cautious optimism, which was immediately vindicated by the sight of a bottle of Famous Grouse and half a dozen plastic cups in the hands of his detectives.

He grinned. 'This looks very like a celebration to me,' he said.

DI Robin Maclennan stepped forward, offering the ACC a whisky. 'I've just had a message from Greater Manchester Police. They arrested a guy on suspicion of rape a couple of weeks ago. When they ran the DNA results through the computer, they got a hit.'

Lawson stopped in his tracks. 'Lesley Cameron?'

Robin nodded.

Lawson took the whisky and raised his cup in a silent toast. He'd been a junior CID detective at the time of Lesley Cameron's murder. She'd been raped and strangled on her way back to her halls of residence. 'That's great news.' Lawson beamed at the rest of the team. 'You see? All it takes is one lucky break. How are the rest of you doing? Karen, did you get anywhere tracking down Rosie Duff's ex-boyfriend? The one we think is Macfadyen's father?'

Karen nodded. 'John Stobie. Turns out he has the perfect alibi. He broke his leg in a motorbike accident at the end of November 1978. The night Rosie was murdered, he had a stookie from thigh to toe. His medical records confirmed it. There's no way he was running around St Andrews in a blizzard. So that's the end of that.'

Lawson turned slightly, cutting himself and Karen off from the others. 'As you say, Karen.' He sighed. 'Maybe I should put Macfadyen onto Stobie. It might get him off my case. He's been on the phone every other day asking how we're doing. I'm beginning to wish he'd never come out of the woodwork.'

'I've still got to interview the other three witnesses,' Karen said.

'Actually, there's only two. Apparently, Malkiewicz died in a suspected arson just before Christmas. And Alex Gilbey has got it into his head, now David Kerr's been murdered too, that there's some mad vigilante out there picking them off one by one.'

'What?'

'He came in to see me a couple of days ago. It's paranoia run mad, but I don't want to encourage him. Maybe it's best if you just leave

the witness interviews. I can't see they'd be any use after all this time.'

Karen was too dogged a detective to be comfortable leaving any avenue unexplored. 'You don't think he could be right? I mean, it's a bit of a coincidence. Macfadyen appears on the scene, finds out we've no hope of catching his mother's killer, then two of the original suspects wind up murdered.'

Lawson rolled his eyes. 'You've been stuck in this investigation room for too long, Karen. Macfadyen's a respectable professional man, for heaven's sake, not some demented vigilante. And we're not going to insult him by interrogating him about two murders that didn't even happen on our patch.'

'No, sir,' Karen sighed.

Lawson put a paternal hand on her arm. 'So let's forget about Rosie Duff for the time being. It's going nowhere.' He knocked back his whisky and headed for the door. He paused on the threshold. 'Great result, Robin. This makes us all look good. Thank you.'

JACKIE PUT FRESH BATTERIES in her tape recorder, then left her car. She'd been pleasantly surprised by the helpfulness of the police press officer she'd called after Alex's visit.

She'd had her pitch ready. She was writing an article comparing the methods the police used in a murder inquiry twenty-five years ago with how they ran an investigation now. It had struck her that the easiest way to get a handle on an old investigation would be to piggyback a cold case review. That way, she'd be dealing with an officer who was current with the details of the case. She'd emphasised that there was no question of criticising the police; this was purely about the changes in procedure and practice that had been brought about by scientific developments and legal changes.

The press officer had called her back the following day. 'You're in luck. We've a case from almost exactly twenty-five years ago. And it so happens that our Assistant Chief Constable was the first police officer at the scene. He's agreed to give you an interview about that. I've also arranged for you to meet DC Karen Pirie, who's been working on the case review. She's got all the details.'

So here she was, breaching the bastion of Fife Police. Jackie didn't normally feel nervous before an interview. But today, there was definitely a buzz of adrenaline in her blood. She hadn't been lying when she'd told Alex that she had something at stake here too. She'd lain awake for hours after they'd talked, keenly aware of how much damage suspicion over David Kerr's death could do to her life.

It was hard to see the young police constable in ACC Lawson, she thought as she settled herself opposite him. He looked like one of those people who have been born with the cares of the world on their shoulders. 'Funny idea, this story of yours,' he said, once the introductions were done with.

'Not really. People take so much for granted now in police investigations. It's good to remind them how far we've travelled in a relatively short period of time.'

'Well, here I am at your disposal,' he said with forced cheerfulness.

'I appreciate it. I know how busy you must be. Can we go back to that December night in 1978? What brought you into the case?'

Jackie dutifully listened while Lawson ran through everything that had happened at the crime scene, up to the point where he had taken the four young men back to the police station.

'That was the extent of my direct involvement with the case,' Lawson concluded. 'Subsequent inquiries were dealt with by CID officers.'

'And you never came near to arresting anyone?'

Lawson pursed his lips. 'No. The finger pointed at the four lads who found the body, but there was never more than circumstantial evidence against any of them. Because of where the body was found, I had a hunch it might have been some sort of pagan ritual killing. But nothing ever came of that idea.' He pushed back his chair. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll have DC Pirie come up and get you. She's better placed than me to run through the case with you.' He pressed the button on his intercom. 'Ask Karen to come up, would you, Margaret?'

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door and Lawson called, 'Come in.' The woman who walked in was the diametric opposite to Jackie. Where the journalist was fluid and lithe, Karen Pirie was solid and graceless. What united them was the obvious spark of intelligence each recognised in the other.

Lawson performed the introductions then skilfully steered them towards the door. 'Good luck with your article,' he said as he closed the door firmly behind them.

Karen led the way to the cold cases review room. 'So what got you interested in this case?'

Jackie ran through her cover story again. It seemed to make sense to Karen. She pushed open the door of the squad room and led the way inside. Jackie looked around, noting the pinboards covered with photographs, maps and memos.

'It goes without saying, by the way, that anything you see or hear in this room relating to current investigations or to any other case should

be treated as confidential,' said Karen. 'Are you clear about that?'

'I'm not a crime reporter. I have no interest in anything other than what we are here to discuss. So no sneaky stuff, OK?'

Karen smiled and showed Jackie to a trestle table set against one wall where she'd arranged the material from the original investigation. 'I don't know how much detail you want,' she said, eyeing the stack of files in front of them.

'I need a sense of how the investigation progressed. What avenues were explored. And of course'—Jackie pulled a self-deprecating expression out of her bag of tricks—'because this is journalism and not history, I need the names of the people concerned, and any background you have on them. Police officers, pathologist, forensic scientists. That sort of thing.'

'Sure, I can give you names. The only one of the players I've ever met is David Soanes, the forensics guy. He did the work, though it was actually his boss who signed off on the report.'

'Why was that?' Jackie asked nonchalantly, trying not to show her elation at getting what she wanted so easily and quickly.

'Standard practice. The person who actually signs off on the reports is always the head of the lab, even though he might never have touched any of the exhibits. It impresses the jury.'

'So much for expert testimony,' Jackie said sardonically.

'You do what it takes to put the bad guys away,' Karen said. 'Anyway, in this instance, we couldn't have been better served. David Soanes is one of the most painstaking guys I've ever come across.' She smiled. 'And these days, he's the guy who signs off on other people's reports. David's the Professor of Forensic Science at Dundee University now. They supply all our forensic services.'

'Maybe I could talk to him.'

Karen shrugged. 'He's a pretty approachable guy. So, where should we start?'

Two tedious hours later, Jackie managed to make her escape. Karen hadn't let her see the original forensic report. But Jackie had got what she came for. Now it was up to Alex.

LYNN SAT in the conservatory, watching the lights on the estuary. She heard the front door close and Alex's cry of 'I'm back'. But before he could join her, the doorbell pealed.

Mumbled voices grew more distinct as they approached, but still she couldn't tell who their visitor was. Then the door opened and Weird strode in.

'Lynn,' he cried. 'I hear you have a beautiful daughter to show me.'

'Weird,' Lynn exclaimed. 'You're the last person I expected to see.'

'Good,' he said. 'Let's hope that's how everybody else is thinking.'

'But what are you doing here?' she asked. 'I thought you went straight back to America after Mondo's funeral?'

'I did. I packed my wife and kids off to the mountains, somewhere they'll be safe from anybody who has an issue with me. And then I disappeared. I crossed the border into Mexico. I felt pretty uneasy after Mondo's funeral. So I hired a private eye in Seattle. I wanted to find out who sent that wreath to Ziggy's funeral. And he came back with an answer. An answer that gave me good reason to come back here. Plus, I figured this was the last place anybody looking for me would expect to find me. Way too near to home.'

Alex rolled his eyes. 'Are you going to tell us what you found out?'

'The man who sent the wreath lives right here in Fife. St Monans, to be precise. I don't know who he is, or how he's connected to Rosie Duff. But his name is Graham Macfadyen.'

Alex and Lynn exchanged a look of anxiety. 'We know who he is,' Alex said. 'Or we can at least make an educated guess.'

'He's Rosie Duff's son,' Lynn said.

Weird's eyes widened. 'She had a son?'

'Nobody knew about him at the time. He was adopted at birth. He must have been three or four when she died,' Alex said.

'Oh my,' Weird said. 'Well, that makes sense, doesn't it? I take it he only found out about his mother's murder recently?'

'He went to see Lawson when the cold case review was launched. He'd started trying to trace his birth mother a few months before that.'

'There's your motive, if he thought you four were responsible for her murder,' Lynn said.

'We need to find out if Graham Macfadyen was in the States the week Ziggy died,' Alex said.

'How do we do that?' Lynn said.

Weird raised a hand. 'Atlanta is Delta's hub. One of my flock has a pretty senior position there. Maybe he can get hold of passenger manifests. I'll call him later, if I may?'

'Of course,' Alex said.

MORNING DAWNED dreich and grey. Unshaven and dazed with broken sleep, Alex leaned his elbows on the breakfast table and watched Lynn feeding Davina. Weird walked in, showered and shaved. Alex took one look and groaned. 'Oh God, it's Tigger.'

'That's a great bed,' Weird said, looking round the room and clocking the coffee maker. He crossed the kitchen and started opening cupboards until he found the mugs.

'Aren't you supposed to have jet lag?' Lynn asked.

'Never suffered from it in my life,' Weird said cheerfully, pouring out his coffee. 'So, Alex, when are we leaving for Dundee?'

Alex stirred himself. 'I'll ring and make an appointment.'

'Are you crazy? Give the guy the chance to say no? No, Alex. No phone calls. We just turn up and make it clear we're not going anywhere until Professor Soanes finds a window.'

'What? So he can jump?' Alex couldn't resist the chance to poke fun at Weird's adoption of American idiom. It sounded so bizarre delivered in an accent that had become more Scottish overnight.

'Ha ha.' Weird sat down at the table.

'You don't think that might piss him off?' Lynn asked.

'I think it tells him we're serious,' Weird said. 'I think it's what two guys in fear of their lives would do.'

PROFESSOR DAVID SOANES was a chubby butterball of a man, rosy-cheeked, with a fringe of curling white hair round a gleaming bald pate and blue eyes that twinkled. He ushered Alex and Weird into a tiny cubicle that barely had room for his desk and a couple of chairs, waved them to the chairs and settled in behind his desk.

Soanes pursed his lips. 'My assistant tells me you gentlemen wanted to discuss the Rosemary Duff case,' he said, his voice rich and plummy. 'I have one or two questions for you first.' He glanced down at a piece of paper. 'Alex Gilbey and Tom Mackie. Is that right?'

'That's right,' Alex said.

'And you're not journalists?'

Alex fished out his business card and passed it over. 'I run a company that makes greetings cards. Tom is a minister.'

Soanes scrutinised the card. He raised one bushy white eyebrow. 'What is your interest in the Rosemary Duff case?'

Weird leaned forward. 'We are two of the four guys who discovered her dying body in the snow twenty-five years ago. You probably had our clothes under your microscope.'

'That was a long time ago. Why are you here now?'

'We think we're on somebody's hit list,' Weird said.

This time, both of Soanes's eyebrows rose. 'You've lost me. What has that to do with me or Rosemary Duff?'

Alex put a hand on Weird's arm. 'Of the four of us who were there

that night, two are dead. They were both murdered in the past six weeks. I know that could just be coincidence. But at both funerals, there was an identical wreath saying, "Rosemary for remembrance." And we believe those wreaths were sent by Rosie Duff's son.'

Soanes frowned. 'I think you're in the wrong place, gentlemen. You should be talking to Fife Police, who are currently conducting a review that includes this very case.'

Alex shook his head. 'I've already tried that. ACC Lawson as good as told me that I'm paranoid. But he's wrong. I think someone is killing us because they're convinced we murdered Rosie. And the only way I can see to get myself off the hook is to find out who really did.'

An impenetrable expression flickered across Soanes's face at the mention of Lawson's name. 'All the same, I still don't quite understand what has brought you here. My personal involvement with the case ended twenty-five years ago.'

'They've lost the evidence,' Weird interrupted.

'I think you must be mistaken. We recently carried out some tests on an item. But our tests for DNA were negative.'

'You got the cardigan,' Alex said. 'But the important things, the clothes with the blood and semen on, they've gone missing.'

There was no mistaking the upsurge in Soanes's interest. 'They've lost the original exhibits?'

'That's what ACC Lawson told me,' Alex said.

Soanes shook his head in disbelief. 'Terrifying,' he said. 'Though not entirely astonishing under this command.' His forehead wrinkled in a disapproving frown. 'Well, without the principal physical evidence, I'm really not sure what you think I can do to help.'

Alex took a deep breath. 'I know you did the original work on the case. And I understand that forensic experts don't always include every detail in their reports. I wondered if there was anything that maybe you hadn't written up at the time. I'm thinking particularly about paint. Because the one thing they haven't lost is the cardigan.'

'And why would I tell you about anything like that. It's scarcely normal practice. After all, one could say you were suspects.'

'We were witnesses, not suspects,' Weird said angrily. 'And you should do it because if you don't and we are murdered, you'll have a difficult time squaring matters with God and your conscience.'

'And because scientists are supposed to care about the truth,' Alex added. 'And I get the feeling that you're a man who sees truth as his province. As opposed to the police, who generally just want a result.'

Soanes leaned an elbow on the desk and looked at them as if he

was considering long and hard. Then he sat up and flipped open a cardboard folder on his desk. He glanced at the contents, then looked up and met their expectant eyes. 'My report dealt principally with blood and semen. The blood was all Rosie Duff's, the semen was assumed to belong to her killer. Because whoever deposited the semen was a secretor, we were able to establish his blood group. All of that was covered fully in my report.' He caught Alex's look of disappointment and gave a small smile. 'And then there are my notes.'

He pulled out a sheaf of handwritten notes. He took a pair of gold-rimmed half-moon glasses from his waistcoat pocket and perched them on his nose. 'I've not looked at this for years. Now, where are we . . .?' He turned a couple of pages covered in a tiny, dense script. 'Here we go—paint.' He stabbed the page with a finger. He looked up. 'What do you know about paint?'

'Emulsion for walls, gloss for woodwork,' Weird said.

Soanes smiled. 'Every batch of paint has its own microscopic signature. So it's possible to analyse a paint stain and say what kind of paint it is. And as well as the paint itself, we look at the physical stain. Is it a spatter? Is it a drop? Is it a scraping?' Soanes returned to his notes. 'The paint on the cardigan was a pale blue aliphatic polyurethane enamel. Not a common house paint. More the sort of thing you'd find on a boat, or something made of fibreglass. What was most interesting about it was the profile of the droplets. They were shaped like minuscule teardrops.'

Alex frowned. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that the paint wasn't wet when it made its way onto the clothing. These were tiny, tiny drops of dried paint that were undoubtedly transferred to her clothes from a surface on which she was lying. Probably a carpet.'

'So somebody had been painting something in the place where she was lying? And they'd got paint on the carpet?' Weird asked.

'Almost certainly. But I have to come back to the odd shape. If paint drips from a brush, or spatters on a carpet, the droplets would not look like this. And all of the droplets we looked at in this case shared the same profile.'

'Why didn't you put all that in your report?' Alex asked.

'We couldn't explain it. And it's very dangerous to the prosecution case to have an expert witness in the box answering, "I don't know."' Soanes pushed his papers back into the folder. 'So we left it out.'

'If you looked at that evidence again, would you be able to come up with a different answer?'

'Me personally? No. But a forensic paint expert might well be able to provide a more useful analysis. Of course, your chances of finding a match twenty-five years on is negligible.'

'That's our problem,' Weird said. 'Can you do it? Will you do it?'

Soanes shook his head. 'I'm far from being an expert in the area. But even if I were, I couldn't authorise tests without a request from Fife Police. And they didn't ask for tests on the paint.'

'Why not?' Weird asked.

'I would presume because they thought it was a waste of money.'

Alex slumped down in his chair, deflated. 'I'm not going to be able to change Lawson's mind. I think you just signed my death warrant.'

'I didn't say it was impossible to have tests conducted,' Soanes said. 'What I said was that they couldn't be conducted here.'

Soanes took a plastic sheet divided into pockets out of the folder. Tucked inside were a dozen microscope slides. Soanes removed three of them and lined them up on the desk. Alex stared at them hungrily.

'Somebody else could analyse these?' he said.

'Of course,' Soanes said. He took a paper bag from his drawer and placed it on top of the slides, pushing them to Alex and Weird. 'Take them. We have others we can analyse independently, should anything come of it. You'll need to sign for them, of course.'

Weird put the slides in the bag and slid it into his pocket. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Where do I sign?'

As Weird scribbled his name on the bottom of a log sheet, Alex looked curiously at Soanes. 'Why are you doing this?' he said.

'Because I hate unsolved puzzles,' Sloane said, getting to his feet. 'Almost as much as I hate sloppy police work.'

'WHY ARE WE turning off?' Weird asked as they hit the outskirts of Glenrothes and Alex signalled a right turn.

'I want to tell Lawson about Macfadyen sending the wreaths. And I want to persuade him to get Soanes to test the samples he's got.'

'Waste of time,' Weird grunted, but said nothing more as Alex drove to police headquarters.

At the front desk, Alex asked to see Lawson. 'In connection with the Rosemary Duff case,' he said. They were directed to a waiting area.

After a few minutes, a stocky woman came across to them. 'I'm DC Pirie,' she said. 'I'm afraid ACC Lawson is unavailable. But I'm the officer in charge of the Rosemary Duff case.'

Alex shook his head. 'I want to see Lawson. I'll wait.'

'That won't be possible. He's actually on a couple of days' leave.'

'Gone fishing,' Weird said ironically.

Karen Pirie, caught by surprise, said, 'Yes, as it happens. Loch—' before she could stop herself.

Weird was surprised. 'Really? I was just using a figure of speech.'

Karen tried to cover her confusion. 'It's Mr Gilbey, isn't it?' she said, looking intently at Alex.

'That's right. How did you . . .?'

'I saw you at Dr Kerr's funeral. I'm sorry for your loss.'

'That's why we're here,' Weird said. 'We believe the same person who killed David Kerr is planning to kill us.'

Karen took a deep breath. 'ACC Lawson briefed me on his meeting with Mr Gilbey. And as he told you then,' she continued, looking at Alex, 'there really is no basis for your fears.'

Weird gave a snort of exasperation. 'What if we told you that Graham Macfadyen sent those wreaths?'

'Wreaths?' Karen seemed puzzled.

'I thought you said you'd been briefed?' Weird challenged her.

Alex intervened, telling Karen about the curious floral tributes, and was gratified when she appeared to take them seriously.

'That is strange, I'll grant you. But it's not an indication that Mr Macfadyen is going around killing people.'

'How else would he know about the murders?' Alex asked.

'He'd have seen Dr Kerr's death in the papers. And I imagine it wouldn't be hard to find out about Mr Malkiewicz. The Internet has made it a very small world,' Karen said.

'But why would he send the wreaths unless he thought we were responsible for his mother's death?'

'Believing you to be responsible is a long way from murder,' Karen said. 'I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do.'

'Yes, there is,' Alex said. 'You can ask for a new analysis of the paint that was found on Rosie Duff's cardigan.'

'How do you know about the paint?'

Frustration lent an edge to Alex's voice. 'You think we didn't notice when your colleagues scraped our walls? So how about it, DC Pirie? How about actually trying to find out who killed Rosie Duff?'

Needled by his words, Karen drew herself up straight. 'That's exactly what I've been doing, sir. And the official view is that a paint analysis would not be cost-effective, given the remoteness of the possibility of finding a match after all this time.'

'Not cost-effective? If there's any possibility, you should pursue it,' Alex shouted. 'It's not as if you've got any other expensive forensic

testing to do, is it? Not now you've lost the only evidence that might finally have cleared our names. Do you have any idea what you people did to us back then because of your incompetence? You tainted our lives. So don't talk to me about cost-effectiveness. Just do your bloody job.' Alex turned on his heel and marched out.

Weird stood his ground. 'You heard the man,' he said. 'Tell Jimmy Lawson to reel in his line and keep us alive.'

10

James Lawson switched on the pump that supplied the caravan's little sink with a stream of cold water. He reminded himself to bring a couple of replacement five-gallon bottles the next time he came out to his bolt hole on the shores of Loch Leven. Though he could always rely on the local farmer who rented him the pitch in an emergency, Lawson didn't like to impose on his goodwill. He'd always kept to himself in the twenty years since he'd moved the caravan up here. That was the way he liked it. Just him and the radio and a pile of thrillers. A private place where he could escape the pressures of work and family life, a place to renew his energies.

He was halfway through his tea when he heard something he shouldn't have. A car door slammed. He eased the curtain back a fraction. Just beyond the gate into the field, he could make out the shape of a car. Medium-sized hatchback, he thought. A Golf, an Astra, something like that. It was hard to be more accurate in the dark.

The rap at the door made his heart leap in his chest. Who the hell was this? As far as he was aware, the only people who knew exactly where his fishing lair was were the farmer and his wife. He'd never brought colleagues or friends here.

'Just a minute,' he shouted, rising and moving towards the door, pausing only to palm a knife. There were plenty of criminals who might feel they had a score to settle, and he wasn't going to be caught unprotected. Keeping one foot behind the door, he opened it a crack.

In the sliver of light that spilled out onto the steps stood Graham Macfadyen.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Lawson demanded.

'I need to talk to you. They said you were having a couple of days off, so I thought you must be here.'

'How the hell did you find me here?'

Macfadyen shrugged. 'You gave an interview to the *Fife Record* last time you were promoted. It's on their website. You said you liked fishing, that you had a place at Loch Leven. There's not many roads that go close to the waterside. I drove around till I spotted your car.'

'This isn't appropriate,' Lawson said. 'Come and see me at the office if you want to discuss police business.' Lawson started to close the door, but Macfadyen raised a hand and pressed against it.

'I'll stand outside and shout if you won't let me in,' he said.

Lawson let the door swing open and stepped back. Macfadyen followed him inside.

'What was it you wanted to talk to me about?' Lawson asked.

'They're gathering. They're huddling together to try to avoid their fate,' Macfadyen said, as if it were an explanation.

'Who's gathering?' Lawson asked.

'My mother's killers. Mackie's back. He's moved in with Gilbey. It's the only way they feel safe. But they're wrong. That won't protect them. I've never believed in fate, but there's no other way to describe what's happened to that foursome lately. They're afraid. It's time to use that weakness to drive a wedge between them. You have to arrest them, make them tell you the truth. They could crack at any time.'

'We've no evidence,' Lawson said.

'They'll confess. What more evidence do you need?'

'In Scots law, a confession on its own isn't enough to convict someone. There needs to be corroborative evidence.'

'You've got to do something. Get them to confess, then find the evidence that will make it stand up in court. That's your job,' Macfadyen said, his voice rising.

Lawson shook his head. 'That's not how it works. Look, I promise I'll go and talk to Mackie and Gilbey. But that's all I can do.'

Macfadyen clenched his right hand into a fist. 'You don't care.'

'Yes, I do care,' Lawson said. 'But I have to operate inside the law. And so do you, sir.'

Macfadyen made a strange noise in the back of his throat, like a dog choking on a chicken bone. 'You were supposed to understand,' he said, grabbing the door handle and pulling the door open.

Then he was gone, swallowed by the darkness. The damp chill of the night invaded the cosy fug of the caravan, smothering the smell of stale cooking and replacing it with the tang of marshes. Lawson stood in the doorway long after Graham Macfadyen's car had reversed erratically up the track, his eyes dark pools of worry.

LYNN WAS THEIR ticket to Jason McAllister. And she wasn't leaving Davina with anyone, not even Alex. And that was why what should have been an easy run out to Bridge of Allan had turned into a major operation. It was amazing what had to travel with a baby, Alex thought as he made his third trip to the car, listing under the combined weight of the baby seat and Davina.

Lynn and Weird joined him and they all piled into the car. A few minutes later they were on the motorway.

Lynn's work as a restorer of paintings for the national galleries of Scotland meant she'd become an expert in the sort of paint artists used at different periods. It also meant she'd had to find her own expert who could analyse the samples from the original so she could make her match as accurate as possible. The man she'd found was Jason McAllister. He worked in a private forensic lab near Stirling University. Most of his working life was spent analysing paint fragments from road-traffic accidents, either for the police or for insurance companies. When Alex and Weird had come home with a bag of paint samples, Lynn had been on the phone to Jason within ten minutes. As she'd expected, he'd reacted like a child who's just been told he's spending the summer at Disneyland.

The lab was a modern building set off the main road in its own grounds. The windows were set high in the brick walls, and CCTV cameras covered every angle of approach. They had to be buzzed through two sets of security doors before they reached the reception.

'I've been in prisons with less security,' Weird commented. 'What do they do here? Manufacture weapons of mass destruction?'

'They do freelance forensic work for the Crown Office,' Lynn explained as they waited for Jason to join them. 'So they've got to demonstrate that any evidence they take custody of will be secure.'

As she spoke, a burly man approached and clapped an arm round her shoulder. 'You brought the baby,' he said, leaning over to peer into the carrier. 'Hey, she's gorgeous.' He straightened up. 'I'm Jason,' he said, looking from Weird to Alex.

They introduced themselves. Alex took in the Stirling Albion shirt, the cargo pants with bulging pockets and the spiked hair, its tips bleached a blond never found in nature.

'Come away through,' Jason instructed them.

They followed him down a narrow corridor. At the end, he led them into a daunting laboratory. Mysterious equipment gleamed in every corner. Worktops were neat and tidy, and a technician peered down the barrel of a futuristic microscope.

'I feel like I'm contaminating the place just by breathing,' Alex said.

'It's less of an issue with paint,' Jason said. 'If I was in DNA, you'd be getting nowhere near the sharp end. So, tell me again exactly what it is you've got for me.'

Alex ran through what Soanes had revealed the previous afternoon. 'Soanes thinks there's not much chance of finding a match for the paint, but maybe you can tell something new from the shape of the drops,' he added.

Jason peered at the slides. 'Looks like they've kept them in good condition, which is a plus.'

'How long is it all going to take?' Weird asked.

'I'll be doing it in my own time. A couple of days? I'll be as quick as I can.'

'Thanks, Jason,' Lynn said. 'I owe you.'

He grinned. 'I do like that in a woman.'

WEIRD, ALEX AND LYNN sat round the kitchen table, blinds closed against the evening dark, the wine bottles emptying as they talked round in circles, reliving the past again, Alex and Weird running over the damage done to their lives by the toxic rumours that had enveloped their final year at St Andrews.

It was Weird who first lost patience with the past. 'I need some fresh air,' he announced. 'I'm going for a walk. Anybody want to keep me company?'

There were no takers. Alex was about to cook dinner and Lynn was feeding Davina. Weird borrowed Alex's waxed jacket and set off for the shore. The temperature had dropped, and Weird hunched into the collar of the jacket. He veered off towards the shadows under the railway bridge, knowing that if he climbed up on the headland, he'd earn himself a great view down the estuary.

The wind was picking up, blustering and whooping around his head. He paused for breath, aware of the distant hum of traffic on the road bridge. He heard the clatter of a train on the approach to the rail bridge and leaned back, craning his neck to watch it make its toy-town progress 150 feet above his head.

Weird neither saw nor heard the blow that brought him to his knees. The second blow caught him in the ribs and propelled him crashing to the ground. He had a vague impression of a dark figure toting what looked like a baseball bat before a third blow across his shoulders sent his scattered thoughts reeling with pain. His fingers scrabbled for purchase on the rough grass as he tried to crawl out of

range. A fourth blow struck him across the back of the thighs, making him collapse onto his stomach, beyond escape.

Then, as suddenly as the attack had begun, it was over. Through a miasma of pain and dizziness, Weird was vaguely aware of shouting and the sound of a small dog yapping. Then everything went dark.

'I'M NOT GOING to the hospital,' Weird insisted. He'd said it so many times, Alex was beginning to think it was incontrovertible evidence of concussion. Weird sat at the kitchen table, rigid with pain. His face was drained of colour and a long welt stretched from his right temple to the back of his skull.

'Is anything coming back about the attack?' Alex asked.

'I didn't see a thing before the first blow. And after that, my head was reeling. I saw a dark shape. Probably a man. And a baseball bat.'

'You didn't see his face?'

'I think he must have been wearing some kind of mask. The next thing I knew, I'd fainted. When I came round, your neighbour was kneeling beside me. Then I threw up over his dog.'

In spite of the affront to his Jack Russell, Eric Hamilton had helped Weird to his feet and supported him the quarter of a mile back to the Gilbeys' house. He'd muttered something about disturbing a mugger, brushed off their effusive thanks and melted back into the night.

'We need to call the cops,' Lynn said.

'Let's wait till tomorrow. Then we can speak directly to Lawson. Maybe now he'll take us seriously,' Alex said.

'You think this was Macfadyen?' Weird asked.

'This isn't Atlanta,' Lynn said. 'It's a quiet wee village in Fife. I don't think anybody's ever been mugged in North Queensferry. And if you were going to mug someone, would you pick on a giant in his forties when there's pensioners walking their dogs on the foreshore every night? This wasn't random; this was meant.'

'I agree,' Alex said. 'It follows the pattern of the other murders. Dress it up to look like something else. Arson, burglary, mugging. If Eric hadn't come along when he did, you'd be dead now.'

THE PHONE RANG just after seven the next morning. Alex grabbed the receiver. He wasn't prepared for the jollity of Jason McAllister.

'Hi, Alex,' the forensic paint expert greeted him cheerfully. 'Listen, I've got some information for you. I can come over now, and run it past you before I go into work. How would that be?'

'Great,' Alex said heavily.

'Smashing. I'll be with you in half an hour.' The phone went dead.

'That was Jason,' Alex said to Lynn. 'He's on his way. I'd better get in the shower.'

Alex found Weird in the kitchen looking terrible. The only colour in his face came from the bruising round his eyes. He sat awkwardly, hands wrapped round a mug. 'You look like shit,' Alex said.

'I feel like it too.' He sipped coffee and winced. 'Why don't you have decent painkillers?'

'Because we don't make a habit of getting hammered,' Alex said over his shoulder as he left to answer the door.

Jason bounced into the room, then did a double take as he took in Weird's appearance. 'Shit, man. What the hell happened to you?'

'A man with a baseball bat,' Alex said succinctly. 'We weren't joking when we said this might be a matter of life and death.' He poured a coffee for Jason. 'I'm impressed that you've got something for us so soon,' he said.

Jason shrugged. 'When I got to it, it wasn't such a big deal. I did the microspectrophotometry to establish the colour, then I ran it through the gas chromatograph for the composition. It didn't match anything in my data base, though.'

Alex sighed. 'Well, we were expecting that,' he said.

Jason held up a finger. 'Now, Alex. I am not a man without resources. A couple of years ago, I met this guy at a conference. He is the world's biggest paint head. He works for the FBI, and he reckons he's got the most extensive paint data base in the universe. So I got him to run my results against his records, and bingo! We got it.'

Lynn walked in in time to hear this. 'So what was it?' she asked.

'It was made by a small manufacturer in New Jersey in the mid-seventies for use on fibreglass and certain types of moulded plastic. The target market was boat builders and owners.' He opened his backpack and rummaged around, eventually producing a computer-generated colour chart. A swatch of pale blue was outlined in black marker. 'That's what it looked like,' he said. 'The good news is that if by some miracle your crime scene has survived, the chances are that we could still make a match. The paint was mostly sold on the Eastern Seaboard of the US, but they did export into the UK. The company went belly-up in the late eighties, so there's no way of telling where it ended up over here.'

'So the chances are that Rosie was killed on a boat?' Alex asked.

'If she was, it must have been a fair-sized boat.'

'Why do you say that?'

'This is where the shape of the paint drops comes into play. Tiny tears, that's what we've got here. And one or two fibre fragments, which look like carpet tile to me. And this tells me a story. These drops came off a brush while something was being painted. This is a very motile paint, which means that it came off in minute droplets. It's the kind of fine spray you'd get if you were working over your head at full stretch. And because there's almost no variation in the shape of the droplets, that suggests all the paint was applied overhead and at an equal distance. None of this fits with painting a hull. Even if you had the hull upside-down to paint the inside, you wouldn't be doing it somewhere carpeted, would you? And the droplets would vary in size because some of the surface would be nearer to you, wouldn't it?' He paused, looking round the room.

'So what are we left with? If it was a boat, then your man was probably painting the inside of the cabin roof. Now, I did some experiments with a very similar paint and, to get this effect, I needed to be reaching quite high. And small boats don't have much headroom. So I guess your man had a pretty big boat.'

'If it was a boat,' Lynn said. 'Couldn't it have been something else? The inside of a trailer? Or a caravan?'

'Could be. You probably wouldn't get carpet in a trailer, though, would you? It could have been a shed, or a garage too.'

'The bottom line is that it doesn't take us any further forward,' Weird said, disappointment in his voice.

The conversation veered off in several directions. But Alex had stopped listening. His brain was ticking, a train of thought triggered by what he'd just heard. Connections were forming in his mind, links between apparently unconnected pieces of information forging into a chain. Once you gave space to the first unthinkable thought, so many things made sense. The question now was what to do about it.

He suddenly realised he'd been out of it. Everyone was looking at him expectantly, waiting for an answer to some unheard question. 'What?' he said. 'Sorry, I was miles away.'

'Jason asked if you wanted him to write a report,' Lynn said.

'Great idea,' Alex said. 'That's brilliant, Jason, really impressive.'

As Lynn showed Jason to the door, Weird gave Alex a penetrating look. 'You've got an idea, Gilly,' he said. 'I know that look.'

'No. I was just racking my brains, trying to think of anybody from the Lammas that had a boat. There were a couple of fishermen, weren't there?' Alex turned away and busied himself, popping a couple of slices of bread in the toaster.

'We should remind Lawson about that,' Weird said.

'Yeah. You can tell him.'

'Why? Where are you going to be?'

'I need to go into the office for a few hours. There's a couple of meetings this morning I really need to go to.'

Lynn walked through the door carrying the morning papers. Alex munched his toast, lost in thought. While the others were occupied with the papers, he picked up the colour chart Jason had left behind and tucked it into his trouser pocket. Then he announced his departure, kissed his wife and sleeping baby and left the house.

He eased the BMW out of the garage and onto the street, heading for the motorway that would take him over the bridge to Edinburgh. But when he reached the roundabout, instead of turning south on the M90, he took the northbound slip road. He had no time to waste sitting in meetings.

LYNN GOT BEHIND the wheel of her car with a sense of relief. She was starting to feel claustrophobic in her own home. She had to get away. The need to shop had provided the perfect excuse. She'd wrapped Davina up warmly, tucked her into her carrier and escaped.

She decided to drive up to the big Sainsbury's at Kirkcaldy. As she left the motorway at Halbeath, the fuel warning light appeared on her dashboard. She flicked the indicator at the turnoff for the services and cruised down to the pumps, entirely oblivious of the car that had been on her tail since she'd left North Queensferry.

Lynn fuelled up the car, then hurried inside to pay. As she waited for her credit card to be accepted, she glanced out to the forecourt.

At first, she couldn't take it in. The scene outside was wrong, all wrong. Then it sank in. Lynn screamed at the top of her lungs and stumbled towards the door, her bag hitting the floor and scattering its contents as she ran.

A silver VW Golf was parked behind her car, engine running, driver's door wide open. The passenger door of her car was also ajar, shielding whoever was leaning in from sight. As she hauled open the heavy door of the service area, a man straightened up, thick black hair falling over his eyes. He was clutching Davina's carrier. He cast a glance in Lynn's direction then ran for the other car. Davina's shrieks pierced the air like a blade.

He half threw, half pushed the baby carrier into his passenger seat, then jumped in. He slammed the car into gear and took off, his tyres screaming on the tarmac.

ALEX LEFT THE MOTORWAY at Kinross and headed towards Loch Leven. When she'd let slip that Lawson was off fishing, Karen Pirie had said 'Loch' before she stopped herself. And there was only one loch in Fife where a serious fisherman would ply his rod. Alex couldn't stop thinking about his recent revelation. Because he knew deep down none of his friends had done it, and because he couldn't imagine Rosie wandering around in a blizzard alone, easy prey for a stranger, he'd always tended to believe she'd been killed by a mystery boyfriend. And if you were planning to seduce a lassie, you didn't take her to a shed or a garage. You took her to the place where you lived.

Alex drove slowly, turning off on every farm track and side road that led down towards the shores of the loch. He pulled up in every gateway he came to, getting out of the car and leaning into fields lest he miss his quarry. He took his time, moving methodically along the lochside. He spent the best part of an hour prowling around a small caravan site, but what he was looking for wasn't there. That didn't really surprise him. He didn't expect to find the object of his hunt anywhere that ordinary punters had access to.

THE FIRST OFFICER at the scene had found an incoherent woman wailing on the forecourt with the distraught attendant standing helpless at her side.

'You get Jimmy Lawson here, now,' she'd kept screaming at him while the attendant explained what had happened.

The policeman had tried to ignore her demands, radioing in for urgent assistance. Then she'd grabbed his jacket and demanded the presence of the ACC Crime. He suggested she might want to call her husband, a friend, anyone.

Lynn stormed back inside the garage. From her scattered possessions she grabbed her mobile. She tried Alex's number, but the irritating voice of the service told her the number was unavailable. 'Fuck,' Lynn yelled. Fingers fumbling over the keys, she managed to ring home.

When Weird answered, she wailed, 'Tom, he's taken Davina. The bastard's taken my daughter.'

'What? Who's taken her?'

'I don't know. Macfadyen, I suppose. He's stolen my baby.' Now the tears came, cascading down her cheeks and choking her.

'Where are you?'

'The services at Halbeath. I stopped for petrol. I was only away a minute . . .' Lynn gagged on her words and dropped the phone at her feet. She crouched down, wrapped her arms over her head and sobbed.

WEIRD TRIED to get hold of Alex. But his mobile wasn't responding, and Alex's office denied having seen him or heard from him at all that morning. So Alex was on the missing list too.

He reached for the phone, wincing at even such a small movement, and asked directory inquiries for the number of Fife Police. It took him all his powers of persuasion to get through to Lawson. And after what felt an interminable wait, a voice Weird recognised sounded in his ears.

'This better be good, Mr Mackie. I've been dragged out of a meeting with the Chief Constable to talk to you.'

'Macfadyen has snatched Alex Gilbey's baby,' Weird snapped.

'What did you say?' Lawson said.

'About a quarter of an hour ago, Graham Macfadyen kidnapped Davina Gilbey. She's only a couple of weeks old.'

'I know nothing about this, Mr Mackie. Tell me what you know.'

'Lynn Gilbey stopped for petrol at Halbeath services. While she was paying, Macfadyen stole the baby from Lynn's car. Your guys are there now. Why has nobody told you?'

'Did Mrs Gilbey recognise Macfadyen?' Lawson demanded.

'No. But who else would want to hurt Alex like this?'

'Children are kidnapped for all sorts of reasons, Mr Mackie. It may not be personal.'

'Of course it's personal,' Weird shouted. 'Last night, somebody tried to beat me to death. You going to play the coincidence card again? Because we're not buying it. You need to get off your arse and find Macfadyen before anything happens to that baby.'

'Let me speak to my officers on the ground. Where is Mr Gilbey?'

'I don't know. He was supposed to be going to his office, but he's not turned up there. And his mobile's not responding.'

'Leave this with me. Whoever has the baby, we'll find them. And we'll bring her home.'

LAWSON CALLED the control room and asked for a report on Halbeath. As soon as he heard the words, 'Silver Volkswagen Golf,' his brain replayed the walk up Macfadyen's path, the car parked in the drive. No question about it. Macfadyen had crossed the line.

'Patch me through to the officer in charge at the scene,' he ordered.

Eventually, a voice crackled on the line. 'This is DI McIntyre.'

'Cathy, it's ACC Lawson here.'

'Yes, sir. I was about to call you. The mother of the kidnapped baby, Mrs Lynn Gilbey, seems to think you'll know what this is all about.'

'It was a silver VW Golf the abductor drove off in, is that right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I think I know who's responsible for this. Graham Macfadyen is his name. He lives at 12 Carlton Way, St Monans. I suspect that's where he's taken the child. I think a hostage situation is what he's aiming for. I want you to meet me there, at the end of the road. I'll organise the hostage negotiation team at this end.'

Lawson ended the call, then called the control room again and ordered the mobilisation of the hostage negotiation team and an armed response unit. 'Oh, and get a telecoms engineer there too. I want his access to the outside world terminated.' Finally, he rang Karen Pirie. 'Meet me in the car park in five minutes,' he barked.

He was halfway to the door when his phone rang. He debated whether to answer it, then turned back. 'Lawson,' he said.

'Hello, Mr Lawson. It's Andy in the press office here. I've just had the *Scotsman* on with a very peculiar tale. They say they've just had an email from a guy who claims he's abducted a baby because Fife Police are shielding his mother's murderers. They're asking if it's true.'

'Christ,' Lawson groaned. 'Yes, a baby has been abducted. The control room can give you chapter and verse. I suspect you're going to get a lot of calls on this, Andy. Give them as much operational detail as you can. And go strong on the line that this guy is mentally disturbed and they shouldn't give credence to his ramblings.'

'So the official line is that he's a nutter,' Andy said.

'Pretty much. But we're treating it very seriously. A child's life is at stake here, I don't want irresponsible reporting sending this guy over the edge. Is that clear?'

'I'm on it. Talk to you later.'

11

Alex had covered the south side of the loch. Now he was working his way round to the north shore. He'd lost count of the number of fields he'd looked into. The track he was driving down passed a pathetic-looking farm. A collie strained against a chain, barking at his BMW. A hundred yards past the farm gate, the ruts deepened and grass straggled up the middle. Alex splashed through the puddles, wincing as a rock crunched against his chassis.

A gateway loomed in the hedge to his left, and Alex pulled in wearily. He walked round the front of his car and leaned over the metal bars. He looked to his left and saw a handful of cows chewing the cud. He gave a cursory glance to his right and gasped. He couldn't believe his eyes. Was this really it?

Alex opened the gate and picked his way down the field, not caring about the mud or dung that clung to his loafers. The closer he got to his goal, the more certain he was he'd found what he was looking for.

He hadn't seen the caravan for twenty-five years, but his memory told him this was the one. Two-tone, like he remembered. Cream on top, sage green below. The colours had faded, but it was still possible to match them to his recollection. As he drew closer, he could see it was still in decent repair. There was no sign of life. Light-coloured curtains were drawn across the windows.

What were the chances of this? he wondered. Probably not as remote as it might at first seem. People got rid of furniture, carpets, cars. But caravans lived on, assuming an existence of their own. So really, it wasn't such a surprise that PC Jimmy Lawson had hung on to the caravan he'd lived in while he built his house. Especially since every angler needs a retreat. Most people would have done the same.

Except, of course, that most people wouldn't have been hanging on to a crime scene.

Alex contemplated his options. In any other circumstances, the sensible course of action would be to go to the police. They could send in their forensic team and take the place apart in search of the single drop of blood or the teardrop of paint that would make the connection between this caravan and Rosie Duff's death.

But how could he do that when the caravan belonged to the Assistant Chief Constable? Lawson would stop any investigation in its tracks, kill it dead before it even got started. The caravan would doubtless go up in flames, laid at the door of vandals. And then what would there be? Nothing more than coincidence. Lawson's presence so close to the place where Alex had stumbled over her body. At the time, nobody had thought twice about it. Back in the late seventies in Fife, the police were still above suspicion, the good guys keeping the bad things at bay. But this was a new world, a world where it was possible to question the integrity of men like James Lawson.

If Lawson had been the mystery man in Rosie's life, it made sense that she'd keep his identity secret. Her brothers would have hated her seeing a copper. Then there was the way that Lawson always seemed to turn up when he or his friends were under threat, as if he had

appointed himself their guardian angel. Guilt, Alex thought. In spite of having killed Rosie, Lawson still retained enough decency not to want someone else to pay the price for his crime.

But none of those circumstances was any kind of proof. The only solid evidence was inside that caravan, and if Alex didn't do something about it now, it would be too late. But what could he do? If he forced the door, Lawson would be alerted. At any other time, he might put it down to kids or some homeless wanderer. But not now, with so much interest in the Rosie Duff case. He couldn't afford to treat it as anything other than significant. He might torch the place.

Alex stepped back and considered. There was, he noticed, a skylight on the roof. Maybe he could squeeze in there? But how to get up to the roof? There was only one possibility. Alex trudged back to the gate, wedged it open and drove into the boggy field.

He cruised slowly down to the caravan and stopped parallel with one end. He opened the boot and unfastened the car's standard-issue tool kit. He pocketed a screwdriver, then clambered over the bonnet and onto the car roof. Scrabbling for purchase, Alex somehow managed to launch himself onto the roof of the caravan. It was slippery and slimy. The skylight was a raised plastic dome about thirty inches by twelve. It was going to be a very tight squeeze. He jammed the screwdriver under the edge and tried to lever it up.

After repeated attempts at various points along the rim, it slowly shifted, creaking upwards. Alex peered in. There was a pivoting metal arm with a screw adjustment that kept the skylight in place, so it could be raised and lowered from within. It also prevented the skylight from opening more than a few inches at one end. Alex groaned. He was going to have to unscrew the arm and then replace it.

It was hard to get any purchase on the screws, which hadn't been moved since they were first put in. He strained and struggled until, eventually, first one screw and then the other shifted in their moorings. At last, the skylight swung free.

Alex looked down. It wasn't as bad as it might have been. If he lowered himself carefully, he reckoned he could reach the bench seat that ran along one side of the living area. He took a deep breath, gripped the edge and let go.

In the dim light, it looked as if little had changed since he'd sat here all those years ago. He could hardly bear to look up at the ceiling. What if Lawson had repainted it a dozen times since? Muttering a prayer to Weird's God, he tilted his head back and looked up.

Shit. The ceiling wasn't blue. It was cream. Well, he wasn't going

away empty-handed. He climbed up on the bench seat and chose a spot right in the corner, where it wouldn't be noticed. With the sharp blade of the screwdriver, he chipped away at the paint, catching the flakes in an envelope he'd taken from his briefcase.

When he had gathered a decent amount, he climbed down and picked out a fair-sized chip. It was cream on one side, and blue on the other. From his pocket, he pulled the colour chart Jason had left behind and looked at the blue oblong that had jogged his visual memory of twenty-five years ago. He lifted the edge of the curtain to let daylight in and placed the flake of paint on the swatch of pale blue. It almost disappeared.

THE HOSTAGE NEGOTIATOR, John Duncan, had made three attempts to talk to Graham Macfadyen, but he had refused to budge on his demand to speak to Lawson, and Lawson only. He'd allowed Duncan to hear Davina's cries, but that had been the single concession he'd made. Exasperated, Lawson decided he'd had enough.

'We've got the media breathing down our necks. Give me the phone. I'm doing the talking now,' he said.

Duncan handed over the receiver. 'I'll help you keep it on track.'

Lawson made the connection. 'Graham? It's me. James Lawson. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get here. I understand you want to talk to me?'

'Damn right I want to talk to you. But before we get into it, I should tell you that I'm recording this. It's going out live via a web-cast. The media have all got the website address, so they're probably hanging on our every word. There's no point trying to close down the site. I've got it set up to jump from server to server. Before you can even find where it's coming from, it'll be somewhere else.'

'There's no need for this, Graham.'

'There's every need. You thought you could close me down by cutting the phone lines, but you think like last century's man. I'm the future, Lawson, and you're history.'

'How's the baby?'

'Pain in the arse, actually. It just cries all the time. It's doing my head in. But it's fine. So far, anyway. It's come to no harm yet.'

'You're harming her just by keeping her from her mother.'

'It's not my fault. It's Alex Gilbey's fault. Him and his friends, they kept me from my mother. They murdered her. Alex Gilbey, Tom Mackie, David Kerr and Sigmund Malkiewicz murdered my mother, Rosie Duff, on the 16th of December 1978. They raped her, then they

murdered her. And Fife Police never charged them with the crime.'

'Graham,' Lawson interrupted, 'that's in the past. What we're concerned about now is the future. Your future. And the sooner we end this, the better your future will be.'

'I'm not stupid, Lawson. I know I'll be sent to prison for this. It doesn't make any odds if I give up my hostage or not. I've got nothing left to lose, but I can make damn sure that other people take a hit too. Now, where was I? Oh yes. My mother's murderers. You never charged them. And when you reopened the case recently, with a big fanfare about how DNA would solve old crimes, you found you'd lost the evidence. How could you lose something so important?'

'We're losing control,' Duncan whispered. 'And he's calling the baby "it". That's not good. Get back to the baby.'

'Kidnapping Davina isn't going to change that, Graham.'

'It's stopped you sweeping my mother's murder under the carpet. Now the whole world's going to know what you've done.'

'Graham, I'm as committed as I could be to dealing with whoever killed your mother.'

A hysterical laugh crackled down the line. 'Oh, I know that. I just don't believe in your way of dealing with them. I want them to suffer in this world, not the next.'

'Graham, Davina needs her mother. Why don't you bring her out now and we'll talk about your complaints? I promise we'll listen.'

'Are you crazy? This is the only way to get your attention, Lawson.' The call ended abruptly with the crashing down of the phone at the other end.

Duncan tried to hide his frustration. 'Well, at least we know now what's eating him.'

'He's off his head. We can't negotiate with him if he's broadcasting it to the world. Who knows what crazy allegations he's going to come up with next? The man should be sectioned, not humoured.' Lawson slammed his hand against the wall.

'Before we do that, we need to get him and the baby out of there.'

'Fuck that,' Lawson said. 'When it gets dark, we'll storm the place.'

Duncan was stunned. 'That's way outside the rules of engagement.'

'So is kidnapping a baby,' Lawson said as he stalked back to his car. 'I'm not standing by while a child's life is at risk.'

ALEX HIT THE TRACK with an overwhelming sense of relief. There had been a couple of moments when he'd seriously doubted he'd get out of the field without a tractor. But he'd made it. He picked up his

phone, planning to call Jason and tell him he was on his way with something very interesting. No signal. Alex tutted and drove carefully up the rutted lane towards the main road.

As he neared Kinross, his phone rang. He grabbed it. Four messages. He thumbed the keys and summoned them. The first was from Weird, a terse message telling him to call home. The second was also from Weird, passing on a mobile number. The third and fourth were from journalists asking him to return their calls.

What the hell was going on? Alex pulled into a pub car park on the outskirts of the town and called Weird's number.

'Alex? Thank the Lord,' Weird gasped. 'You're not driving, are you?'

'No, I'm parked up. What's going on? I've got these messages—'

'Alex, Macfadyen has taken Davina. He's holding her hostage. But she's OK. He hasn't hurt her.'

Alex felt as if someone had reached inside and ripped out his heart. 'What about Lynn? Where is she?' he choked out.

'She's here with us, outside Macfadyen's house in St Monans. Hang on, I'll let you speak to her.' A moment passed, then he heard a forlorn shadow of Lynn's voice.

'Where have you been, Alex? He stole Davina. He took our baby, Alex.' He could hear the tears hovering beneath the hoarseness.

'I was in a black spot. No reception. Lynn, I'm coming. Hold on. I know something that'll change everything. Don't let them do anything, you hear? It's going to be OK. Put Weird back on, please?' As he spoke, he was starting the engine and pulling out of the car park.

'Alex?' He could hear the strain in Weird's voice. 'How soon can you be here?'

'I'm in Kinross. Forty minutes? Weird, I know the truth. I know what happened to Rosie and I can prove it. When Macfadyen hears this, he'll understand he doesn't need to take any more revenge. You've got to stop them doing anything that puts Davina at risk until I can tell him what I know. This is dynamite.'

'I'll do my best. But get here fast as you can, eh?'

Alex jammed his foot to the floor and drove as he'd never driven.

LAWSON LOOKED around the church hall they'd commandeered. 'The technical support team can identify which rooms Macfadyen and the baby are in using thermal imaging. So far, he's spent most of his time in a room at the back of the house. The baby is sometimes with him and sometimes in the front room. So it should be straightforward. We wait till they're separated, then one team goes in the front and gets the

baby; the other team goes in the back and closes down Macfadyen.

'We wait till it's dark. The streetlights will be off. He won't be able to see a damn thing. But Macfadyen is mentally unstable. We have no idea whether he is armed or not. We have reason to believe he has already killed twice. He said himself he has nothing left to lose. If he shows any sign of reaching for a weapon, I am authorising you to open fire. Any questions?'

The room was silent. The officers in the armed response group had honed their skills for an operation like this.

MACFADYEN TAPPED the keys and clicked his mouse. The connection over the mobile phone was abominably slow, but he'd managed to upload his conversation with Lawson to the website now. He sent out a follow-up email to the news outlets he'd contacted earlier, telling them they could get a front-row seat at the siege by linking to his site, where they could hear for themselves what was going on.

He was under no illusion that he could control the outcome. But he was determined to do what he could to make this front-page news.

ALEX WAS HALTED at a police roadblock. He could see the massed emergency vehicles ahead, could make out the red and white barriers at the mouth of Carlton Way. He rolled down the window. 'I'm the father,' he told the police officer who leaned down to speak to him. 'It's my baby in there. My wife's here somewhere; I need to be with her.'

'Have you got some ID, sir?' the constable asked.

Alex produced his driving licence. 'Please, let me through.'

The constable compared his face to the picture on the licence, then turned away to speak into his radio. He came back a moment later. 'If you'd park on the verge, Mr Gilbey, one of the officers will take you to your wife.'

Alex followed another yellow-jacketed officer to a white minibus. He opened the door and Lynn leapt out of her seat, falling into his arms on the steps. For a long time, no one spoke. Then Alex said, 'It's going to be OK. I can end this now.'

Lynn looked up at him, eyes red-rimmed and swollen. 'How, Alex? You can't fix this.'

'I can, Lynn. I know the truth now.' He looked over her shoulder and saw Karen Pirie sitting by the door next to Weird. 'Where's Lawson?' he asked Karen.

'He's at a briefing,' she said. 'He'll be back soon. You can talk to him then.'

Alex shook his head. 'I don't want to talk to him. I want to talk to Macfadyen.'

'That won't be possible, Mr Gilbey. It's being dealt with by trained negotiators. They know what they're doing.'

'You don't understand. There are things he needs to hear that only I can tell him. I don't want to threaten him. I don't even want to plead with him. I just need to tell him something.'

Karen sighed. 'I know you're very upset, Mr Gilbey. But you could do a lot of harm thinking you're doing good.'

Alex gently disengaged himself from Lynn's arms. 'This is about Rosie Duff, right? This is happening because he thinks I had something to do with Rosie Duff's murder, isn't it?'

'That would appear to be the case, sir.' Karen spoke cautiously.

'What if I told you that I can answer his questions?'

'If you have information pertaining to the case, I'm the one you should be talking to.'

'All in good time, I promise. But Macfadyen deserves to be the first to hear the truth. Please. Trust me. It's my daughter's life at stake here. If you won't let me talk to Macfadyen, I'm telling the press what I know. And believe me, you don't want me to do it that way.'

Karen weighed up the situation. Normally, she'd pass it up the line. But Lawson was busy. 'Let's talk to Inspector Duncan,' she said. 'He's been speaking to Macfadyen.'

She climbed out of the minibus and called one of the uniformed officers over. 'Please stay with Mrs Gilbey and Mr Mackie.'

'I'm going with Alex,' Lynn said mutinously.

Alex took her hand. 'We go together,' he said to Karen.

'OK, let's go,' she said, leading the way towards the cordon that blocked the entrance to Macfadyen's street.

Karen brought them to a white van parked outside Macfadyen's house. In the gathering dusk, everything seemed overlaid with gloom. Karen banged on the side of the van and the door slid open.

John Duncan's head appeared in the gap. 'DC Pirie, isn't it?'

'This is Mr and Mrs Gilbey. He wants to speak to Macfadyen, sir.'

Duncan's eyebrows rose in alarm. 'I don't think that's a good idea. The only person Macfadyen wants to speak to is ACC Lawson. And he's given orders for no more calls till he gets back.'

'He needs to hear what I have to say,' Alex said heavily. 'He's doing this because he wants the world to know who killed his mother. He thinks it was me and my friends. But he's wrong. I found out the truth today and he should be the first person to hear it.'

Duncan failed to hide his astonishment. 'You're saying you know who killed Rosie Duff?'

'I do.'

'Then you should be making a statement to one of our officers,' he said firmly.

'That's my daughter in there. I can end this now. Every minute you delay letting me talk to him is a minute when she's at risk. I'm not talking to anybody but Macfadyen. And if you won't let me talk to him, I'm going to the press. I'm going to tell them I have the means to finish this siege and you won't let me use them.'

'You don't know what you're doing here. You're not a trained negotiator.' Alex could tell it was Duncan's last throw of the dice.

'All your training doesn't seem to have done you much good, does it?' Lynn interjected. 'Let Alex try. We'll take full responsibility for the outcome.'

Duncan looked at Karen. She shrugged. He took a deep breath and sighed. 'I'll be listening in,' he said. 'If I think the situation is getting out of control, I'll end the call.'

Relief made Alex dizzy. 'Fine. Let's do it,' he said.

Duncan brought out the phone and clamped headphones over his ears. He handed a pair to Karen and the receiver to Alex. 'It's all yours.'

The phone rang. Halfway through the fourth ring, it was picked up. 'Back for more, Lawson?' the voice on the other end said.

'This isn't Lawson. This is Alex Gilbey.'

'I've got nothing to say to you, you murdering bastard.'

'Give me a minute of your time. I've got something to tell you.'

'If you're going to deny you killed my mother, save your breath. I won't believe you.'

'I know who killed your mother, Graham. And I have proof. It's here in my pocket. I've got paint flakes that match the paint on your mother's clothes. I took them this afternoon from a caravan by Loch Leven.' No response other than a sharp intake of breath. Alex soldiered on. 'There was someone else there that night. Someone nobody paid any attention to because he had a reason to be there. Someone who met your mother after work and took her back to his caravan. I don't know what happened, but I suspect she probably refused to have sex with him and he raped her. When he came to his senses, he realised he couldn't let her go to tell her tale. It would be the end of everything for him. So he stabbed her. And he took her up to Hallow Hill and left her there to die. And nobody ever suspected him because he was on the side of the law.'

Karen Pirie was staring at him now, open-mouthed and horror-struck as she grasped the implications of what he was saying.

'Say his name,' Macfadyen whispered.

'It was Jimmy Lawson who murdered your mother, Graham.'

'Lawson?' It was almost a sob. 'This is a trick, Gilbey.'

'No trick, Graham. Like I said, I've got proof. What have you got to lose by believing me? End this now, you get the chance to see justice done at last.'

There was a long silence. Duncan edged forward, poised to take the phone from Alex. Alex deliberately turned away, gripping the handset tighter. Then Macfadyen spoke.

'I thought he was doing it because it was the only way of getting some kind of justice. And I didn't want it his way because I wanted you to suffer. But he was doing it to cover his back,' Macfadyen said, his words meaning nothing to a bewildered Alex.

'Doing what?' Alex said.

'Killing you guys.'

Alex struggled to make sense of Macfadyen's words. 'What do you mean?' he asked.

'I saw him last night. With the baseball bat. Under the bridge. Hitting your pal. I thought he wanted justice. I thought that's why he was doing it. But if Lawson killed my mother . . .'

Suddenly the line went dead. Baffled, Alex rounded on Duncan. 'What the fuck?' he said.

'Enough,' Duncan said. 'I'm not having this broadcast to the world. What the hell is this, Gilbey? Some kind of pact between you and Macfadyen to fit up Lawson?'

'I heard you, Lawson killed Rosie,' Lynn said, gripping his arm.

'Not just Rosie. He killed Ziggy and Mondo too. And he tried to kill Weird. Macfadyen saw him,' Alex said wonderingly.

'I don't know what you think you're playing at . . .' Duncan began. He was stopped in his tracks by the arrival of Lawson.

Pale and sweating, he looked around the group, puzzled and clearly angry. 'What the hell are you two doing here?' he demanded, pointing at Alex and Lynn. He rounded on Karen. 'I told you to keep her in the ARU van. Christ, this is a circus. Get them out of here.'

There was a moment of silence, then Karen Pirie said, 'Sir, some serious allegations have been made that we need to talk about . . .'

'Karen, this is not a fucking debating society. We're in the middle of a life-and-death operation,' Lawson shouted. He raised his radio to his lips. 'Is everyone in position?'

Alex dashed the radio from Lawson's hand. 'Listen to me, you bastard.' Before he could say more, Duncan was grappling him to the ground. Alex wrestled the policeman, dragging his head free to shout, 'We know the truth, Lawson. You killed Rosie. And you killed my friends. It's over. You can't hide any longer.'

Lawson's eyes blazed fury. 'You're as mad as he is.' He bent down and retrieved his radio as a couple of officers dived on top of Alex.

'Sir,' Karen said urgently.

'Not now, Karen,' Lawson snapped. He turned away, his radio to his face again. 'Is everyone in position?'

The replies crackled back through his earpiece. Before Lawson could respond, he heard the voice of the technical-support commander. 'Hold fire. Target with hostage.'

He hesitated for only a second. 'Go,' he said. 'Go, go, go.'

MACFADYEN was ready to face the world. Alex Gilbey's words had restored his faith in the possibility of justice. He would give the man his daughter back. To ensure safe passage, he'd take a knife with him. One final insurance policy to get him safely out the door and into the arms of the waiting police.

He was halfway to the front door, Davina tucked under his arm like a parcel, a kitchen knife in his free hand, when his world exploded. Doors caved in, men shouted, a deafening cacophony. Brilliant white flares exploded, blinding him. Instinctively, he pulled the child round to his chest. The hand holding the knife came up towards her.

The lead marksman saw a child's life at risk. He spread his feet, steadied his gun hand and aimed for the head.

12

April 2004; Blue Mountains, Georgia

Sunshine shimmered above the trees as Weird led the way to an outcrop of rock that jutted over the slope and clambered up, settling down with his long legs dangling from the edge. He reached into his backpack and came out with a pair of binoculars. He trained them down the hillside then passed them to Alex.

Alex adjusted the focus and ranged over the territory below. All of a sudden, he realised he was looking at the roof of their cabin. The figures running around outside were Weird's kids. The adults sitting

by the picnic table were Lynn and Paul. And the baby kicking on the rug at her feet was Davina.

He'd come so close to losing her. When he'd heard the gunshot, he thought his heart would explode. Lynn's scream had echoed in his head like the end of the world. An eternity had passed before one of the armed cops had emerged with Davina in his arms, and even that had been no relief. As they approached, all he could see was blood.

But the blood had all been Macfadyen's. The marksman had hit his target unflinchingly. Lawson's face could have been carved from granite for all the expression he showed.

In the mayhem that had followed, Alex had grabbed Karen Pirie. 'You need to secure that caravan.'

'What caravan?'

'Lawson's fishing caravan. Up at Loch Leven. He killed Rosie Duff in it. The paint on his ceiling matches the paint on Rosie's cardigan. You never know, there might even be blood traces still.'

'You expect me to take that shit seriously?'

'It's the truth.' He pulled the envelope out of his pocket. 'I've got the paint that will prove I'm right. If you let Lawson get back to the caravan, he'll destroy it. The evidence will go up in smoke. You've got to stop him doing that. I'm not making this up,' he said, desperate for her to believe him. 'Duncan heard Macfadyen too. He saw Lawson attacking Tom Mackie last night. Your boss will stop at nothing to cover his tracks. Take him into custody and secure that caravan.'

Karen's face had remained expressionless. 'You're suggesting I arrest my Assistant Chief Constable?'

'If Lawson wasn't who he is, you wouldn't be hesitating.'

'But he is who he is, a highly respected senior police officer.'

'All the more reason why you should take this seriously. You think this isn't going to be all over the papers tomorrow morning? If you think Lawson's clean, then show him to be clean.'

'Your wife's calling you, sir,' Karen had said icily. She'd walked away, leaving him stranded.

But she'd taken his words on board. She hadn't arrested Lawson, but she had gathered a couple of uniformed officers and unobtrusively left the scene. Next morning, Alex had received a call from Jason, who'd heard on the forensic grapevine that his colleagues in Dundee had taken possession of a caravan. Game on.

Alex lowered the binoculars. This was the first chance he'd had to talk to Weird alone since they'd arrived the previous day. 'Karen Pirie came to see us last week,' he said.

'How was she?'

'I think she's still pretty shaken up. Her and most of the cops in Fife. It's a bit of a stunner when you find out that your Assistant Chief Constable's a rapist and a multiple murderer.'

'So Karen came to debrief you?'

'Sort of. It's not her case any more. She had to hand over the Rosie Duff investigation to officers from an outside force, but she's made pals with one of their team. Which means she's still got an inside track. Credit to her, she wanted to fill us in on the latest.'

'Which is what?'

'The forensics have been completed on the caravan. As well as the paint matches, they found tiny spots of blood where the bench meets the floor. They took blood samples from Rosie's brothers and Macfadyen's body, because of course there's nothing left of Rosie's DNA for comparison so they have to go with close relatives. And the overwhelming odds are that the blood in Lawson's caravan came from Rosie Duff.'

'That's incredible,' Weird said. 'After all this time, he gets caught by a flake of paint and a drop of blood.'

'One of his former colleagues has come forward with a statement that Lawson used to boast about passing the time on the night shift by taking lassies back to his caravan and having sex with them. Karen says the fiscal's office were a bit wobbly at first, but they decided to go ahead with a prosecution. When he heard that, Lawson just crumbled.'

'So why did he do it?'

Alex sighed. 'He'd been going out with her for a few weeks. And she wouldn't go the whole way. He says she drove him beyond control. He raped her. According to him, she said she was going straight to the police. And he couldn't handle that, so he picked up his filleting knife and stabbed her. Then he dumped her on Hallow Hill. He meant it to look like it had been a ritual killing. According to Karen, Lawson ditched the physical evidence the first time DNA was used successfully in court. It was still held at St Andrews then, so he'd have had no trouble accessing it. The cardigan was genuinely misfiled at some point when the evidence was moved from one location to another, but the rest of the clothes, the stuff with the biological samples, he got rid of himself.'

Weird frowned. 'How come the cardigan ended up in a completely different place from the body?'

'When he was going back to his panda car, Lawson found the

cardie lying in the snow. He'd dropped it carrying the body up the hill. He just stuffed it into the nearest hedge. It was the last thing he wanted sitting around in his police car.'

'I still don't see why he decided to start killing us off,' Weird said.

'According to Lawson, he was being blackmailed.'

'Blackmailed? Who by?'

'Mondo.'

Weird looked thunderstruck. 'Mondo? You're kidding. What kind of sick line is Lawson shooting now?'

'I don't think it's a line. You remember the day Barney Maclennan died?'

Weird shuddered. 'How could I forget?'

'Lawson was the front man on the rope. He saw what happened. According to him, Maclennan was hanging on to Mondo, but Mondo panicked and kicked him off the rope.'

Weird closed his eyes momentarily. 'I wish I could say I don't believe it, but it's exactly how Mondo would react. Still, I don't understand what that has to do with Lawson being blackmailed.'

'After they pulled Mondo up, Lawson went in the ambulance with him. He told Mondo he'd seen what had happened and promised he would make sure Mondo paid the full legal price for what he'd done. And that's when Mondo dropped his wee bombshell. Mondo claimed that he'd seen Rosie getting into Lawson's patrol car one night outside the Lammas. Well, Lawson knew he'd be in deep shit if that came out. So he did a deal. If Mondo kept quiet about what he'd seen, Lawson would do the same.'

'Not so much blackmail as mutually assured destruction,' Weird said harshly. 'What went wrong?'

'As soon as the cold case review was announced, Mondo went to see Lawson and told him that the price of his continued silence was to be left alone. He didn't want his life blown apart a second time. And he told Lawson he had insurance. That he wasn't the only one who knew what he'd seen. Only, of course, he didn't specify which one of us he'd allegedly told. That's why Lawson was so insistent that Karen concentrate on the physical evidence rather than interviewing us again. It bought him time while he killed off anyone who might know the truth.' Alex rubbed a hand over his face. 'The irony is, if it hadn't been for Graham Macfadyen's obsession with the case, Lawson might have succeeded in killing all four of us.'

'What do you mean?'

'If Graham hadn't been tracking us all via the Internet, he'd never

have found out about Ziggy's death and he wouldn't have sent that wreath. Then we'd never have made a connection between the two murders and Lawson could have picked us off at his leisure. Even then, he muddied the waters as much as he could. He made sure I knew all about Graham, though he pretended he'd accidentally let it slip. And he told Robin Maclennan how Mondo had killed his brother. That way, he gave himself a bit of insurance. After Mondo was killed, the sly bastard went to Robin and offered him an alibi. Which Robin agreed to, not thinking for a minute that it worked the other way too—that he was giving an alibi to the real killer.'

Weird shivered and pulled his legs up, hugging his knees to his chest. 'But why did he come after me? He must have realised that neither of us knew what Mondo had seen or else we'd have confronted him with it after Mondo's death.'

Alex sighed. 'By that time, he'd dug himself in too deep. Because of Macfadyen's wreaths, we'd made the connection between two killings that were supposed to look completely unrelated. His only hope was to make Macfadyen look like the killer. And Macfadyen wouldn't have stopped at two, would he?'

Weird shook his head sadly. 'But why did he kill Ziggy first?'

Alex groaned. 'Apparently he'd already booked his holiday in the States before the cold case review was announced.'

Weird licked his lips. 'So it could just as easily have been me?'

'If he'd decided to go fishing on your side of the country, yes.'

Weird closed his eyes, steepling his fingers in his lap. 'What about Ziggy and Mondo? What's happening about that?'

'Not so good, I'm afraid. In spite of the fact that Lawson's singing like the proverbial bird, they've got no corroborative evidence that ties Lawson into Mondo's murder. He's got no alibi, but he claims he was up at his caravan that night, so even if they can find a neighbour to confirm his car wasn't at his house, he's covered.'

'He's going to get away with it, isn't he?'

'It looks that way. Under Scots law, a confession has to be corroborated before a prosecution can succeed.'

'What about Ziggy? Have the Seattle police done any better?'

'A little. But not much. We know Lawson was in the US the week before Ziggy died. He was supposedly on a game-fishing trip in Southern California. But here's the thing. When he took his rental car back, it had about two and a half thousand miles more on the clock than you'd get from local driving.'

'And that's a round trip from Southern California to Seattle, right?'

'Right. But there's no direct evidence.'

'I can't believe he's going to get away with murder again.'

'I thought you believed in a judgment more powerful than humans can provide?'

'God's judgment doesn't absolve us from the duty to operate in a moral universe,' Weird said seriously.

'Karen did have one other piece of news. They've finally decided not to charge Lawson with attempted murder for his attack on you.'

'Why the heck not? I told them back then that I was willing to come back and testify.'

Alex sat forward. 'Without Macfadyen, there's no direct evidence that it was Lawson who did you over.'

Weird sighed. 'Oh well. At least he's not going to be able to wriggle off the hook over Rosie. I guess it doesn't much matter whether he faces charges over what he tried to do to me. What matters most is that we finally got the answer to who took Rosie's life.'

Alex gazed out over the treetops to the distant horizon where mountains folded into each other in a blue haze. 'I often wonder how different my life would have been if Rosie had accepted my invitation and come to the party that night. She'd still be alive. So would Mondo and Ziggy. Our friendship would have survived in better nick. And we'd have lived without guilt.'

'You might have ended up marrying Rosie instead of Lynn,' Weird commented wryly.

'No.' Alex frowned. 'That would never have happened.'

'How not? Don't underestimate how slender are the threads that bind us to the life we have. You fancied her.'

'It would have worn off. And she would never have settled for a boy like me. She was far too grown up. Besides, I think I knew even then that Lynn was the one who would save me.'

'Save you from what?'

Alex smiled, a small, private smile. 'From anything and everything.' He stared down towards the cabin and the clearing where his heart was held hostage. For the first time in twenty-five years, he had a future, not just the millstone of a past. And it felt like a gift that he'd finally earned.

VAL McDERMID

'Writers cannibalise' everything,' says author Val McDermid. 'Your friends tell you about some terrible thing that has happened to them and while the human being in you is genuinely sympathetic the writer in you is thinking, "I'm going to have that!"' *A Distant Echo* is a case in point. Inspiration came from a story she heard from a friend. 'She told me how her son, a medical student, and three of his friends were coming back form the pub one night when they came upon a lad being beaten up by a gang of youths. They chased off his attackers and then went back to see if they could help. At which point the police turned up and immediately leapt to the conclusion that my friend's son and his pals were the attackers. Luckily, the guy on the ground was conscious and able to explain. But I immediately thought, What if he'd been dead? And that,' she says, 'was enough to set me off.'

For Val McDermid, writing *A Distant Echo*, set partly in the late seventies, was a powerful emotional journey back to the years she spent as a teenager in the small town of Kirkcaldy. 'It brought up all sorts of events and issues that had long been buried at the back of my mind,' she says. 'I think each of the four main characters embodies some aspect of my own experiences, and that's always tough to get into. But it did make the research easier,' she jokes.

Val McDermid left her native Scotland when she accepted a place at Oxford to read English. She went on to train as a journalist and subsequently worked on newspapers in Glasgow and Manchester, all the while writing fiction in her spare time. When her first novel was rejected by publishers, an actor friend persuaded her to turn it into a play. Not only was it performed, it also led to a further commission. However, she was still determined to write a novel and so turned her hand to crime writing. *Report for Murder* was published in 1987, since when Val McDermid has gone from to strength, winning a string of awards and widespread acclaim for the recent television series based on her novel *Wire in the Blood*.

trojan odyssey

clive cussler

Ocean Wanderer,
the biggest and most
glamorous floating
hotel the world has
ever seen, has finally
opened for business—
just as one of the worst
hurricanes in history is
predicted to be
heading towards it,
putting thousands of
lives at risk.

Admiral Sandecker,
head of NUMA, knows
exactly who to send to
pull off a rescue
operation that looks all
but impossible.

one

August 15, 2006, Key West, Florida. Dr Heidi Lisherness was about to shut down her computer and meet her husband for a night on the town when she took one last glance at the latest image from the Super Rapid Scan Operations satellite over the Atlantic Ocean. To the untrained eye, it was a few innocent clouds drifting over an azure-blue sea, but Heidi saw something more menacing. She compared the image with one taken only two hours earlier. The mass of cumulus clouds had increased in bulk more rapidly than any spawning storm she could remember in her eighteen years of forecasting tropical hurricanes with the National Underwater and Marine Agency. She enlarged both images.

Her husband, Harley, a jolly-looking man with a walrus moustache who worked for the National Weather Service as a climatological analyst, stepped into her office. 'What's keeping you?' he said. 'I have reservations at the Crab Pot.'

Without looking up, she motioned at the two images on her computer. 'These were taken two hours apart. Tell me what you see.'

Harley examined them and his brow furrowed. He nodded. 'One hell of a fast build-up.'

'Too fast,' said Heidi. 'Most storms take days, sometimes weeks, to build to this strength. I have a feeling this one will be unpredictable.'

Harley smiled. 'You will keep me informed as she builds?'

'The National Weather Service will be the first to know,' she said, lightly slapping him on the arm.

'Thought of a name for your new friend yet?'

'If she becomes as nasty as I think she might, I'll call her Lizzie, after the axe murderess, Lizzie Borden.'

'Sounds fitting.' Harley handed his wife her handbag. 'Time enough tomorrow to see what develops. I'm starved. Let's go eat some crab.'

THE HAMMERHEAD SHARK drifted through the air-clear water like a grey cloud over a meadow. Its bulging eyes, gazing from the ends of a flat stabiliser that spread across its snout, caught a motion and swivelled, focusing on a creature swimming through the coral forest below. The thing looked like no fish the hammerhead had ever seen. It had two parallel fins protruding to the rear and was black with red stripes along the sides. The huge shark continued its search for more appetising prey, not realising that the odd creature would have made a tasty morsel indeed.

Summer Pitt had noticed the shark, but ignored it, concentrating on her study of the coral reefs of Navidad Bank, seventy miles northeast of the Dominican Republic, where no fewer than 200 shipwrecks had come to grief over four centuries.

The coral on this section of the bank was pristine and beautiful, its vivid colours and sculptured contours spreading like a majestic garden. It seemed to Summer that she was swimming into a labyrinth of alleyways and tunnels, some opening into canyons and crevasses large enough to drive a truck through.

She glanced at her compass and made a slight turn to the left, kicking her fins while clasping her hands behind her, under her twin air tanks, to reduce water resistance. She was encased from head to foot in a heavy-duty vulcanised rubber wet suit and wore a full face mask as protection from the chemical contamination that she expected to encounter. The only clues to her beauty were the exquisite grey eyes gazing through the face mask and a wisp of red hair that showed on her forehead.

Summer loved the sea—every dive was a new adventure. A student of ocean sciences, she had graduated from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography with a master's degree. At the same time, her twin brother, Dirk, had achieved his degree in ocean engineering at Florida Atlantic University.

Soon after they returned to their home in Hawaii, they were informed by their dying mother that the father they had never known was Special Projects Director for the National Underwater and Marine Agency in Washington, DC. Only on her deathbed did she

describe her love for him and why she had let him believe that she had died when her father's dwelling off the north shore of Hawaii collapsed in an earthquake. Badly injured and disfigured, she thought it best that he live his life unencumbered by her. Several months later she gave birth to twins, naming Summer after herself, and Dirk in memory of their father.

After her funeral, Dirk and Summer flew to Washington to meet Pitt Snr for the first time. Stunned and overjoyed at the sudden appearance of a son and daughter he had no idea existed, Dirk Pitt was also deeply saddened to learn that the love of his life had lived all these years as an invalid and had died only the previous month.

Embracing the family he had never known, he immediately moved them into the old aircraft hangar where he lived with his huge classic car collection. When he was told that their mother had insisted that they follow in his path and become educated in ocean sciences, he orchestrated their employment with NUMA.

Now, after two years of working on ocean projects around the world, Summer and her brother had embarked on a journey to investigate and gather data on the strange toxic contamination that was killing the fragile sea life on Navidad Bank and other reefs throughout the Caribbean.

A shadow crossed above a sandy gap in the coral, and Summer looked up to see a formation of five spotted eagle rays. One peeled off and cruised around her, staring curiously before swooping up and rejoining the others. Most parts of the reef system still teemed with healthy fish. Brightly hued snappers mingled with huge parrotfish and groupers while little iridescent yellow and purple tropical fish darted around tiny brown and red sea horses.

After travelling another forty yards, she slipped over a formation of horny gorgonian coral and came within view of a shipwreck. A huge barracuda hovered over the debris, staring with black, beady eyes.

The steamship *Vandalia* had been driven onto Navidad Bank in 1876 during a fierce hurricane. Of her 180 passengers and thirty crewmen, none had survived. Listed by Lloyd's of London as lost without a trace, her fate had remained a mystery until divers discovered the shipwreck in 1982.

A hundred and thirty years on the bank had covered her with coral. The only obvious signs of what was once a proud ship were the boilers and engines that still protruded from the twisted carcass and exposed ribs. Most of the wood was long gone.

Forcing visions of the tragedy from her mind, Summer checked the

air left in her tanks on the pressure gauge, marked her position on a Global Positioning System satellite minicomputer and glanced at her compass. Swimming another 100 yards, she saw the bright colours of the coral fading. The farther she swam, the more the sponges became glazed and diseased, until they ceased to exist. Visibility also dropped, until she could see no further than the extended tips of her fingers. Near the surface was a brown mass that looked like sewage. It was a phenomenon known as 'brown crud', which had appeared throughout the Caribbean. No one knew what caused it. It did not appear to kill fish directly—they avoided the worst of its toxic effects, but soon began to starve after losing their feeding grounds and shelter.

Recording the dead zone on Navidad Bank with cameras, and chemical analysis to determine the brown crud's composition, would come later. This first dive was purely exploratory, to see the effects first-hand, so Summer and her fellow marine scientists on board the nearby research ship could evaluate the scale of the problem and create a plan for its future study.

She collected dead starfish and shellfish and dropped them into a net bag attached to her weight belt. She also removed several small glass bottles from a pouch strapped to one thigh and began taking water samples. When the jars were sealed and secure, she checked her air again. She had over twenty minutes of dive time left. She rechecked her compass readings and began swimming in the direction from which she had come, soon reaching clear water again.

Casually observing the bottom, she sighted the opening to a small cavern in the coral. At first glance it looked like any one of twenty others she'd passed. But there was something different about this one. The entrance had a square-cornered, carved look about it. She thought she could see a pair of coral-encased columns. Curious, she swam over and peered into the gloom.

A few feet inside the chamber the indigo of the walls flickered in the shimmering light from the sun's rays above. Summer slowly swam along the sandy bottom until the blue turned black. Without a dive light there was nothing to see and it didn't take great imagination to picture danger in the inky interior. She nimbly turned and stroked towards the entrance.

Suddenly one of her fins brushed against something half buried in the sand. She was about to dismiss it as a lump of coral, but the object had symmetrical contours.

She dug into the sand until the thing came free. Moving towards the light, she held it aloft and lightly swirled it in the water, cleaning away

the sand. It was about the size of a hatbox, but felt quite heavy. Two handles protruded from the upper part, and it had a pedestal base. The interior looked hollow.

Summer decided to carry it back to the lab, where she could clean away the accumulated coral growth. Adding air to her buoyancy compensator to counter the extra weight of the object under her arm, she languidly swam towards the vessel that she and her brother would call home for the next ten days.

Pisces appeared through the shimmering blue water a short distance ahead. An underwater laboratory dedicated to ocean research, it was a rectangular chamber thirty-eight feet long by ten feet wide by eight feet high, rounded at the ends and supported on legs embedded in the sea floor, fifty feet below the surface. The entry air lock served as a storage unit and a place to don and remove diving equipment. The main lock, which maintained a differential pressure between the two compartments, contained a small lab, a galley, a dining area, four bunk beds and a computer and communications console connected to an outside antenna.

Summer removed her air tanks and connected them with a tank-filling station next to *Pisces*. Holding her breath, she swam up and into the entry lock. Inside, she carefully set the pouch containing her specimen samples in a small container. She set the mysterious, coral-encrusted object on a folded towel. After unsnapping her weight belt and buoyancy compensator, she turned on two valves that activated a strong sprinkling system, washing down her suit and gear with decontamination solution to remove any brown crud residue. Certain she was properly sanitised, she turned off the valves and rapped on the door to the main lock.

Although the face that appeared on the other side of the viewport belonged to her twin brother, there was little resemblance between them. Summer and Dirk were as non-identical as twins could get. He towered over her at six foot four, lean and tanned. Unlike her red hair, his was wavy and black, his eyes an opaline green.

When Summer stepped out of the chamber, he removed the yoke and collar seal between the neck of her suit and head mask. By the grim expression on his face she knew she was in trouble.

Before he could open his mouth, she threw up her hands and said, 'I know, I know, I shouldn't have gone off alone.'

'You know better,' said her brother in exasperation. 'If you hadn't sneaked off at the crack of dawn before I was awake, I would have come after you and dragged you back to the lab by your ear.'

'I apologise,' said Summer, 'but I can accomplish more if I don't have to be concerned with another diver.'

Dirk helped her out of her wet suit. Underneath, Summer wore a skintight polypropylene nylon body suit.

'Did you enter the crud?' asked Dirk with concern in his tone.

She nodded. 'I brought back samples.'

'You certain there was no leakage?'

Holding her arms over her head, she did a pirouette. 'See for yourself. Not a drop of toxic slime to be seen.'

Dirk put a hand on her shoulder. 'Don't ever dive alone again. Certainly not without me if I'm in the neighbourhood. Now, let's get your samples in a sealed case. Captain Barnum can take them back to the ship's lab for analysis.'

'The captain is coming here?' she asked in mild surprise.

'He invited himself for lunch,' he answered. 'He insisted on delivering our food supplies himself.'

'Tell him he can't come if he doesn't bring a bottle of wine.'

'Let us hope he got the message by osmosis,' Dirk said with a grin.

CAPTAIN PAUL T. BARNUM might have been taken for a brother of the legendary Jacques Cousteau, except that his head was almost devoid of hair. Dirk helped him lift a metal box of food onto the galley counter, and Summer began stowing the various supplies.

'I brought you a present,' Barnum announced, holding up a bottle of Jamaican wine. 'Not only that, the ship's cook made you lobster thermidor with creamed spinach for dinner.'

'What would Admiral Sandecker say about us breaking his rule of no booze during working hours?' Summer asked mockingly.

'Your father was a bad influence on me,' said Barnum. 'He never came aboard ship without a case of vintage wine.'

The lobster and creamed spinach, pan-fried in butter, were washed down with the wine and accompanied by tales of Barnum's seafaring adventures. Then Summer presented them with a lemon meringue pie she had baked in the microwave—a culinary miracle, since baking and microwaves do not mix.

When Barnum stood to take his leave, Pitt asked, 'How does the weather look?'

'Pretty calm for the next couple of days,' replied Barnum, 'but a hurricane is building up off the Azores. The ship's meteorologist will keep a sharp eye on it. If it looks like it's heading this way, I'll evacuate the two of you and we'll make full speed out of its path.'

Summer touched his arm. 'I have an enigma for you.' She handed him the object she'd found in the cavern. 'It's some kind of pot or urn. I was hoping you'd take it back to the ship and have someone in the lab clean off the encrustation.'

'I'm sure someone will volunteer for the job.' He hoisted it in both hands as if weighing it. 'Feels too heavy for terracotta.'

Dirk pointed to the base of the object. 'There's a space free of growth where you can see that it's metal. My guess is bronze.'

'And it appears to have some figures moulded around the middle,' added Summer.

Barnum peered at the urn. 'Maybe an archaeologist can solve the riddle after we return to port, if they don't go into hysterics because you removed it from the site.'

'You won't have to wait that long,' said Dirk. 'Why not send it to Hiram Yaeger in NUMA's headquarters? He should be able to come up with a date and where it was produced.'

Barnum placed the urn in a net bag and took the pouch of water samples Summer had collected, then he donned a wet suit and slipped through the entry lock door. Without bothering to don air tanks, he took a deep breath and dropped out of the entry lock into the water, then stroked to the surface, exhaling as he rose. He swam to his little inflatable boat, climbed in and pulled up the anchor. Then he started the motors and skimmed across the water towards his ship.

Sea Sprite, like all the other ships in the National Underwater and Marine Agency fleet, was painted bright turquoise. She had started life as an icebreaker tug and spent her first ten years stationed near the North Pole, battling storms while towing damaged ships out of ice floes. She was still in her prime when purchased by Sandecker for NUMA; he ordered her to be refitted as a multipurpose ocean research and dive support vessel. No research ship in any country in the world matched her rugged sophistication.

Once on *Sea Sprite*'s deck, Barnum immediately carried Summer's find to the ship's laboratory to be cleaned up. By ten o'clock that evening, the urn was on a helicopter heading towards the airport at Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, where it would be put on a jet to Washington, DC.

THE NUMA HEADQUARTERS building, a magnificent green glass tubular structure, rose thirty storeys beside the Potomac River overlooking the Capitol. Its tenth floor was the domain of Hiram Yaeger, NUMA's chief computer wizard, and he had assembled and

catalogued a mass of data on the sea, covering every known scientific research study, investigation and analysis, dating from the earliest ancient records to the present. There was nothing like it anywhere else in the world.

Yaeger, wearing Levi's and old cowboy boots, his greying hair pulled back in a ponytail, peered at his monitors. He orchestrated the vast complex from a large circular console set on a central raised platform.

Intrigued by the urn that had been airshipped from Captain Barnum, Yaeger lifted it out of its box and set it in a transparent cylinder the size of a closet that stood to one side of the open-plan computer centre. Then he punched in a code on his keyboard. In a few moments a three-dimensional figure of an attractive woman materialised in the tubular chamber. A creation of Yaeger's, the ethereal lady was an image of his own wife—a talking, thinking, computerised manifestation that had a personality all its own.

'Hello, Max,' greeted Yaeger. 'Ready to do a little research?'

'I'm at your beck and call,' Max replied in a husky voice.

'The object at your feet was found in a cavern on Navidad reef by a NUMA biologist. I'd like you to identify it with an approximate date and culture.'

'They could have done a better job of dressing it up,' Max said drily, looking down at the encrusted urn.

'It was a rush job. Circulate through university archaeological date networks until you find a close match.'

'You're coercing me into a criminal act, you know,' she said slyly.

'I do it out of sheer benevolence.'

Max rolled her eyes. 'Spare me.'

Yaeger's index finger touched a key, and Max slowly vaporised while the urn sank into a receptacle beneath the floor of the tube.

In that instant a blue phone, amid a row of coloured receivers, buzzed. Yaeger held the earpiece against his ear as he continued typing on his keyboard. 'Yes, Admiral.'

'Hiram,' came the voice of Admiral James Sandecker. 'I need the file on that floating monstrosity that's moored off Cabo San Rafael in the Dominican Republic.'

'I'll bring it up to your office.'

JAMES SANDECKER, aged sixty-one, was doing pushups when Yaeger was ushered into his office by a secretary. A short man, a few inches over five feet, he had a thick carpet of red hair matched by a red Vandyke beard. A fitness addict, he jogged every morning and worked

out in the gym every afternoon. He glanced up at Yaeger through cool, assertive blue eyes, then jumped to his feet and motioned him to a chair across from his desk.

They were joined by Rudi Gunn, deputy director of the agency, who was less than an inch taller than the admiral and whose main job was to oversee NUMA's many scientific ocean projects operating around the world. A highly intelligent individual, and a former naval commander who had served under Sandecker, Gunn stared at the world through thick-lensed, horn-rimmed glasses. He nodded at Hiram Yaeger and sat down in an adjacent chair.

Yaeger laid a thick folder in front of the admiral. 'Here is everything we have on the *Ocean Wanderer*.'

Sandecker opened the folder and studied the specifications of the luxury hotel that had been designed as a self-contained floating resort. It could be towed to any one of several exotic locations throughout the world, where it would be moored for a month until it was hauled to its next site. Sandecker looked up, his expression grim. 'This thing is a catastrophe waiting to happen.'

'I have to agree,' said Gunn. 'Our engineering staff scrutinised the interior structure and came to the conclusion that the hotel was inadequately designed to survive a violent storm. A strong hurricane could rip it off its moorings.'

'According to the specs, it's built to withstand one-hundred-and-fifty-mile-an-hour winds,' pointed out Yaeger.

'It's not the wind we're concerned about,' said Sandecker. 'Because the hotel is moored out to sea, it's at the mercy of high waves that could beat the structure to pieces.'

'Wasn't any of this taken into consideration by the architects?' asked Yaeger.

Sandecker scowled. 'We pointed out the problem to them, but were ignored by the founder of the corporation that owns it.'

'He was satisfied that an international team of marine engineers had pronounced it safe,' added Gunn. 'And because the United States has no jurisdiction over a foreign enterprise, it was out of our hands to interfere with its construction.'

Sandecker put the specifications back in the file and closed it. 'Let us hope the hurricane that is building off the Azores will either bypass the hotel or fail to build to a category five.'

Gunn said, 'I've already alerted Captain Barnum, who is supporting the *Pisces* coral investigation not far from the *Ocean Wanderer*, to listen out for hurricane warnings.'

'And our centre in Key West is tracking the hurricane's path now,' said Yaeger.

'Keep me informed,' said Sandecker. 'The last thing we need is a double disaster.'

WHEN YAEGER RETURNED to his computer console, he found a green light blinking on the control panel. He sat down and typed in the code that prompted Max to put in an appearance.

'Have you analysed the urn from *Pisces*?' he asked.

'I have,' Max answered, as the object rose from inside the floor. 'To begin with, it is not an urn. It is an amphora because it has small handles on the neck. It was cast from bronze, using the lost-wax method, during the middle to late Bronze Age—between 1200 and 1100 BC.'

'That's old.'

'Very old,' Max said confidently.

Yaeger sat up in his chair. '*Where* was it cast?'

'In Gaul, by ancient Celts. I ran a meticulous chemical analysis of the bronze, which is ninety per cent copper with ten per cent tin. The copper came from mines near Hallstatt, Austria, while the tin was mined in Cornwall, England; the style of artwork is Celtic.'

Yaeger thoughtfully absorbed the data. 'Any ideas how a Bronze Age relic came to be in a coral cavern on the Navidad Bank off the Dominican Republic?'

'I was not programmed to deal in generalities,' answered Max haughtily. 'I haven't the foggiest notion how it got there.'

'Speculate, Max,' asked Yaeger. 'Did it fall off a ship or perhaps become scattered cargo from a shipwreck?'

'According to my analysis, the encrustation around the exterior is too old for any shipwreck since Columbus sailed. I dated it as being in excess of twenty-eight hundred years old.'

'That's not possible. There were no shipwrecks in the Western Hemisphere before 1500.'

Max threw up her hands. 'Take it or leave it. I stand by my findings.'

Yaeger leaned back in his chair. 'Print up ten copies of your findings, Max. I'll take it from here.'

THE AVERAGE HURRICANE takes six days to mature to its full magnitude. In four days, Hurricane Lizzie had already increased her winds to 130 miles an hour, classifying as a category three system.

At NUMA's hurricane centre, Heidi Lisherness studied the latest images transmitted from the satellites orbiting the earth 22,000 miles

above the equator. She then emailed her husband, Harley, at the National Weather Service.

> Hurricane Lizzie is moving due west and accelerating. Computer model predicts winds of 150 knots with 40- to 50-foot seas within a radius of 350 miles. She's moving at an incredible 20 knots. Will keep you informed. Heidi.

She turned back to the images of the spiralling white clouds. Nothing up nature's sleeve could match the horrendous energy of a hurricane. Lizzie's eye had formed early, looking like a crater on a white planet. Hurricane eyes could range in size from five miles to over a hundred miles in diameter. Lizzie's was sixty miles across.

Hurricanes usually move at no more than twelve miles an hour, but Lizzie was hurtling across the sea at twenty miles an hour. And unlike most hurricanes that zigged and zagged their way towards the Western Hemisphere, Lizzie was travelling in a straight line.

At three o'clock, Heidi took a call from Harley. 'How's it looking?'

'We're disseminating the data to your centre now,' she answered.

'What does Lizzie's path look like?'

'Believe it or not, she's running straight as an arrow. She hasn't deviated as much as ten miles in the last twelve hours.'

There was a pause. 'That's unheard of.'

'You'll see when you get our data,' said Heidi firmly. 'Lizzie is a record-breaker. Ships are already reporting ninety-foot waves.'

'Good Lord! Can you give me an indication of where she might strike, so my centre can begin sending out warnings?'

'At the moment, I'm betting on the Dominican Republic. But there is no way of knowing for certain for another twenty-four hours.'

'Then it's time to issue preliminary alerts. We'll get right on it.'

'Harley—'

'Yes, love.'

'I won't make it home for dinner tonight.'

'Neither will I, love. Neither will I.'

After she hung up, Heidi sat at her desk for a few moments, staring up at a giant chart of the North Atlantic. As she scanned the Caribbean islands closest to the approaching monster, something tugged at the back of her mind. She brought up on her computer a list of shipping that was in the area. There were more than twenty-two vessels that might suffer the full effects of the storm. Apprehensively, she scanned the names, and one caught her eye. 'Oh Lord,' she moaned. 'The *Ocean Wanderer*.'

two

Nothing remotely approaching it had ever been built before. The *Ocean Wanderer* resort hotel was an adventure waiting to be experienced. She rose above the waves in wondrous splendour two miles off the tip of Cabo Cabrón Peninsula, which jutted from the northeastern shore of the Dominican Republic.

Acknowledged by the travel industry as the world's most extraordinary hotel, she had been built in Sweden to exacting standards. Soaring over 200 feet into the sky, the upper five storeys housed the quarters and offices of the 400 staff and crew, the expansive storerooms, galleys, and heating and air conditioning systems.

The middle levels housed a world-class spa. The roof featured tennis courts and a mini golf course winding round the deck. For the more adventurous, there were spectacular water slides with entries at different levels reached by elevators. One wild ride began at the roof and spiralled down fifteen storeys into the water below. Other water sports were available, including windsurfing, jet-skiing, water-skiing and, of course, scuba-diving. Guests could also experience submarine tours around the reefs, and lectures on the sea were given by teachers of the ocean sciences.

The *Ocean Wanderer* also offered five restaurants run by world-class chefs, two lounges featuring celebrity entertainers, a movie theatre, a casino, an opulent ballroom with a full orchestra, and shops filled with exquisite merchandise. And it was all duty-free.

But the most exciting opportunity lay in the huge, pod-shaped structure beneath the surface of the sea, where the *Ocean Wanderer* had 410 suites, with floor-to-ceiling viewing ports of thick, pressurised glass. Guests could come face to face with sharks and barracudas, giant groupers and manta rays, tropical angelfish, parrotfish and dolphins frolicking amid the coral. At night they could lie in bed and watch the ballet of fish under an array of coloured lights.

Unlike cruise ships, the *Ocean Wanderer* had no engines. It was a floating island moored into position with giant steel pins driven deep into the ocean floor. Stretching from the pins, four heavy cables ran to links that could be automatically coupled or uncoupled.

But it was not a permanent mooring. Five times a year, a pair of 120-foot tugboats would rendezvous with the floating hotel. Giant

buoyancy tanks were pumped dry, raising the hotel until only two levels remained under water, then the mooring cables were released and the tugs, each mounting three 3,000 horsepower diesel engines, would tow the floating hotel to new mooring facilities in one of a dozen scenic locations around the world.

Today was a special occasion. The man who was the driving force behind the creation of the *Ocean Wanderer* was arriving for a four-day stay for the first time since the floating hotel's lavish opening the month before. He was a man with no name, as mysterious as the sea itself, as enigmatic as a 'spectre', that being the nickname given to him by the media. Newspaper and television reporters had failed to penetrate his anonymity. His nationality, age and history had yet to be revealed. All that was known about him was that he headed and directed Odyssey, a giant scientific research and construction empire with tentacles in thirty countries, which made him one of the richest and most powerful men in the civilised world.

AT FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON, the silence of the aquamarine sea and azure sky was shattered by the shriek of a jet aircraft. Curious guests glanced up as an amphibious passenger plane, painted in Odyssey's trademark lavender colour appeared from the west, and made its approach in front of the *Ocean Wanderer*. It settled onto the water then taxied up to a floating dock extending from the main entrance of the hotel.

A welcoming party led by the *Ocean Wanderer*'s executive director, Hobson Morton, stood on the dock while a six-man team of attendants exited the aircraft's main hatch, followed by four security men in blue jumpsuits, who also stationed themselves along the dock.

Several minutes passed before Spectre stepped off the plane. He might have reached a height of five feet five inches if he had stood up straight, but his grossly overweight body made standing rigid an impossibility. His enormous belly stretched a white tailored suit far beyond its double-threaded limits. His head was swathed in a white silk turban, its lower sash covering his chin and mouth. His eyes were hidden by the lenses of mirrored sunglasses.

Morton stepped forward and formally bowed. 'Welcome to the *Ocean Wanderer*, sir.'

There was no shaking of hands. Spectre tilted his head back and stared up at the magnificent structure. 'The appearance exceeds my most optimistic expectations,' he said in a soft, melodious voice.

'I'm sure you will be more than pleased with the interior as well,'

said Morton. 'If you will follow me, I will give you the grand tour before escorting you to the penthouse suite.'

Spectre merely nodded, and began trundling across the dock, his retinue bringing up the rear.

IN THE COMMUNICATIONS ROOM, across a wide hallway from the executive offices, an operator was monitoring and relaying the satellite calls that were coming in from Spectre's headquarters in Brazil and his offices around the world. A light blinked on the console.

'*Ocean Wanderer*, how may I direct your call?'

'This is Heidi Lisherness from the NUMA hurricane centre in Key West. May I speak to the director of your resort?'

'I'm sorry, but he is busy escorting the owner and founder of the *Ocean Wanderer* on a private tour of the hotel.'

'This is extremely urgent. Let me talk to his assistant.'

'Everyone in the executive office is on the tour also.'

'Then will you please, please, inform them that a category five hurricane is heading in the direction of the *Ocean Wanderer*. It is travelling at incredible speed and could strike the hotel as soon as dawn tomorrow. You must, I repeat, you *must* begin evacuating your guests. I will give you frequent updates and will stand by at this number for any questions your director may have.'

The operator dutifully jotted down the hurricane centre's number and then answered several other calls. It was two hours before he tracked down the executive director.

Morton stared at the message and reread it thoughtfully before handing it to Spectre. 'A weather warning from Key West. They report that a hurricane is heading in our direction and suggest we evacuate the hotel.'

Spectre lumbered over to a large window and gazed east across the sea. The sky was free of clouds and the water surface looked calm. 'We'll make no hasty decisions. If the storm follows the usual hurricane track, it should veer north and miss us by hundreds of miles.'

Morton was not so sure. 'I do not believe, sir, it would be in our best interests to risk the lives of our guests or employees. I respectfully suggest that we instruct everyone to begin evacuation procedures and arrange transportation to a safe haven in the Dominican Republic as soon as possible. We should also alert the tugboats to launch an operation to tow us from the worst of the storm.'

Spectre stared out of the window again at the serene weather. 'We'll wait another three hours. I do not wish to harm the image of the

Ocean Wanderer with stories of a mass flight which the media will blow out of proportion. Besides,' he said, throwing up his arms as if to embrace the magnificent floating edifice, 'my hotel was built to resist any violence the sea can throw at her.'

FIFTY MILES NORTH of the *Ocean Wanderer*, Captain Barnum studied the meteorological reports coming in from Heidi Lisherness and he, too, stared towards the east. Unlike Spectre, Barnum was aware of the slowly increasing breeze and rising waves. He had weathered many storms at sea and knew how they could creep up on an unsuspecting crew and engulf them. He picked up the phone and hailed *Pisces*.

Dirk answered. 'What can I do for you, Captain?'

'Is Summer inside *Pisces* with you?'

'No, she's outside, checking the hydrolab oxygen tanks.'

'We have a storm warning. A category five hurricane.'

'Category five? That's a brutal one. How much time do we have before it's on us?'

'The centre at Key West predicted six in the morning. But updates show it's coming on much faster. We have to get you and Summer out of *Pisces* and onto *Sea Sprite* as soon as possible.'

'I don't have to tell you about saturation dives, Captain. My sister and I have been down here four days. It will take us at least fifteen hours of decompression before we can come to the surface. We'll never make it before the hurricane is on us. But at this depth we should be able to weather the storm,' he added confidently. 'We may have to go on a diet, but we have generating power and enough oxygen to last us six days. By then the worst of the storm should have passed.'

Barnum sighed. 'I guess so. Because we may have to terminate your topside support and run for it.' He looked up at the digital clock above the ship's console. 'Take every precaution to extend your air supply.'

'Not to worry, Captain. Summer and I will be snug as bugs in a rug in our little shack down in coral gulch.'

Barnum felt uneasy. Already the sky was filling with threatening clouds and the seas had risen. With a deepening sense of foreboding, he gave orders for *Sea Sprite* to pull up anchor and lay a course away from the predicted path of the storm.

WHEN SUMMER RE-ENTERED the main lock, Dirk gave her a run-down on the nasty weather coming their way and ran through instructions for conserving food and air.

'How soon before the worst of the storm reaches us?' she asked.

'According to the captain, sometime in the early morning.'

'Then you have time for a final dive with me before we're cooped up in here until the weather clears.'

Dirk looked at his sister. 'What's on your mind?' he asked.

'I want to take a closer look inside the cavern where I found the urn. Besides, you always enjoy seeing different species of fish on a night dive that you can't see during the day.'

Dirk was hooked. 'Then let's make it quick. We have a lot of work to do before the storm hits.'

WITH SUMMER IN THE LEAD, they dropped out of the entry lock into the black sea, startling nearby fish as they switched on their dive lights. Above, there was no moon to sweep the surface with shimmering silver. The stars were cloaked by ominous clouds.

Dirk followed his sister into the dark void. She looked back at him through her mask and smiled. Then she pointed to her right and kicked off over some coral which was illuminated by her dive light into a maze of colours. Fish came out of their hiding places to study the unfamiliar, awkward creatures swimming in their midst.

Summer finned through the coral canyons as if she was following a road map. Dirk glanced at his depth gauge: forty-five feet. He looked ahead as Summer suddenly dropped down into a narrow canyon with steep sides. He descended in her wake, noticing a number of openings in the coral leading to shallow caves.

She hesitated before a vertical opening with squared corners sandwiched between a pair of unnatural-looking columns. After turning to see that her brother was still following, she swam into the cavern. This time, with a dive light in hand and the security of her brother nearby, she penetrated deeper, past where she had discovered the urn.

The entrance shaft stretched far into the darkness, then ended abruptly in a flight of steps. A school of angelfish darted past Summer's head as she began to ascend.

Through the water, Dirk heard her utter a distorted squeal. He kicked upwards and was stunned when he broke the surface of the water into an air pocket. He looked up as Summer's light swept over a domed ceiling of chiselled stones.

'What have we got here?' Dirk spoke through his underwater communications system.

'A man-made vault,' Summer murmured. 'Could it be part of a forgotten city, submerged when the sea level rose at the end of the Ice Age?'

Dirk shook his head. 'That was ten thousand years ago. Impossible that it could be that ancient. More likely it sank during an earthquake. And unless there is much more buried under the surrounding coral, my gut instinct is that this was some sort of temple.'

'Built by ancient natives of the Caribbean?'

'I doubt it. Archaeologists have found no evidence of stonemasonry in the West Indies before Columbus. And the natives certainly didn't know how to forge a bronze urn. This was built by a different culture.'

Summer pointed over her shoulder. 'Help me with the camera. We must get a photo record.'

Dirk moved behind her and removed an aluminium carrying case attached to a clip beneath her air tanks. He pulled out a digital camera mounted inside a clear acrylic housing. Setting the controls to manual, he attached the arms for the floodlights.

The instant Summer flicked them on the bleak cave came alive in a montage of green, yellow, red and purple hues. While she photographed the vault below and above the water, which was as clear as glass, Dirk dived down and began exploring the floor. The camera's lights cast weird, quivering images as he slowly worked his way round the perimeter.

He almost passed by without seeing it—a space between two walls no more than two feet wide. Dirk shouldered through, keeping the dive light extended in front of him. He entered another, larger chamber with recessed seats in the walls and a stone bed in the centre. On it was what looked like the upper half of a suit of armour, a gold necklace and two coiled armbands. An intricate metal headpiece sat above the necklace. Dirk began to imagine that a body must once have lain inside the relics. Where the legs might have been were a pair of bronze greaves—ancient armour worn below the knees. A sword blade and dagger blade were on the left side and a spearhead lay on the right.

Sitting at the foot of the bed was a large cauldron. Rising a few inches over four feet, it was too large for Dirk to completely encircle with his arms. He rapped the hilt of his dive knife against the side and heard a dull metallic thud. Bronze. He smeared away the growth on the surface and revealed a figure of a warrior throwing a spear. Using his glove to brush his way round the cauldron, he discovered an army of sculpted men and women wearing armour and carrying man-sized shields and long swords. Almost all of them wore huge helmets, many with horns protruding out of the top.

He swam above the rim and shone his light inside. The cauldron was filled with artefacts: bronze spearheads, dagger blades, axes, coiled

bracelets, combs and chain belts. He left them as he had found them, and moved through an archway that loomed on the opposite side of what he now supposed was a tomb.

He quickly identified the chamber beyond as a kitchen. Bronze tureens, amphorae, urns and jars lay scattered on the floor along with broken clay pots. Beside what appeared to be a fireplace, he found bronze tongs and a ladle, partially buried in silt.

Satisfied there were no more doorways or rooms to explore, Dirk returned to the arched vault. 'I found two more chambers,' he told Summer excitedly.

'This gets more intriguing by the minute,' she said, without taking her eye from the viewfinder.

She recorded more than thirty images of the tomb and its artefacts before photographing the ancient kitchen. Satisfied that she had achieved a detailed inventory of the three chambers, she passed the camera to Dirk, who disassembled its lights and slipped it back into its aluminium container. He made a final check of their air gauges, then led the way back to *Pisces*.

When they finally passed into the main lock, the waves above were pounding the reef like a jackhammer. As Dirk fixed dinner, he and Summer looked forward to discovering the riddle of the underwater temple. Neither had any conception of how vulnerable they were, fifty feet beneath the surface of a vicious sea.

WHEN PAUL BARNUM turned for the twentieth time and stared over the sea, this time the horizon was smudged by a dark grey streak, like a distant dust storm. He was stunned by how rapidly it grew.

For the next eight hours *Sea Sprite* ran hard, as Barnum attempted to put as much distance as possible between her hull and the sharp coral of Navidad reef. But when he realised the worst of the storm was about to overtake him, he turned to his first officer, Sam Maverick, and commanded, 'Bring her around on a heading of eighty-five degrees east, Mr Maverick. We can't outrun the storm so we'll ride into her, bow-on.'

Maverick stared balefully at his captain. 'You want to bring her around in this sea?'

'Better now than when the rogue waves hit. When I see an interval between the swells, at my command, give her full speed.' Then Barnum spoke into the ship's radio. 'We're coming around in a heavy sea. Everyone brace yourselves.'

Hunched over the console, Barnum gazed unblinkingly through the

windshield. There were no intervals; the monstrous waves seemed almost to mesh into one another. He waited until he saw a wave coming that was higher than any that had passed. 'Full speed, if you please, Mr Maverick.'

Maverick instantly obeyed, but was certain of disaster, as an enormous wave bore down on the research ship, tossing the bow up and shoving *Sea Sprite* almost completely over onto her port side before sweeping her around. For fifteen seconds the ship was overwhelmed by a seething white mass of water as she struggled through the crest. Then she was fishtailing viciously down the other side, rolling heavily, the sea inundating her decks. Almost miraculously, with agonising slowness, she righted and took the next wave bow-on, plunging through on an even keel.

Maverick had never seen a more professional, more intuitive, display of seamanship. He stared at Barnum and was amazed to see a grim smile on the captain's face. My God, he thought, the man is actually enjoying himself.

TO THE SOUTH of *Sea Sprite*, the outer edge of Hurricane Lizzie was within minutes of slamming into the *Ocean Wanderer*. Menacing clouds swept past, cutting off the sun and plunging the sea into an eerie grey darkness. A dense sheet of rain followed, pelting the windows of the floating hotel like the blast from a thousand machine guns.

'Too late!' Morton moaned to himself as he stood in his office staring at the tumult heading directly for the hotel. Despite the warnings and updates from Heidi Lisherness, it did not seem possible that calm seas and quiet skies could turn so fast.

'Inform every staff director to assemble here immediately!' he snapped to his secretary.

Angry at Spectre's decision not to evacuate the guests and employees when there was still a chance, he became even more infuriated as the sound of aircraft engines vibrated the windows. He walked over and stared below just in time to see Spectre and his entourage board their executive jet. The entry hatch was barely closed before the engines revved up and the plane gathered speed, banking on a course towards the Dominican Republic.

'You rotten, cowardly scum,' Morton hissed. He watched until the plane was lost in the clouds, then turned as his staff entered and gathered apprehensively round the conference table.

'We underestimated the speed of the hurricane,' he began. 'Its full force is less than an hour away. Since it's too late to evacuate, we must

move all guests and employees to the upper level of the hotel, where it's safest. The tugboats should arrive shortly, but a rising sea will make it extremely difficult for them to make a connection with our towing capstans. If the procedure proves impossible, then we have no choice but to weather the storm.'

The managers, desk clerks, concierges and maids performed admirably in moving the guests from their suites below the water line and accommodating them in the ballroom, spa, theatre and restaurants on the upper levels. Life jackets were passed out along with directions to the life rafts.

The maintenance people roamed the hotel reporting on any damage and organising repairs, though none risked stepping out on the roof. So far the stout structure was holding, its heavy plate windows sustaining gusts of up to 200 miles per hour. There were a few reports of minor leakage, but all the electrical generators and plumbing systems were still functioning.

Morton sent out frantic messages over the radio to other shipping, requesting immediate assistance in evacuating the guests and employees. His pleas were ignored. Every ship within 100 miles was worse off than the hotel. Already, a 600-foot container ship had failed to respond to radio signals. All Dominican Republic military and sea rescue aircraft were grounded, all naval vessels in port. All Morton heard was, 'Sorry, *Ocean Wanderer*, you're on your own. We will respond as soon as the storm abates.'

He kept in contact with Heidi Lisherness at the NUMA hurricane centre, giving her reports on the magnitude of the storm. 'Keep me informed as to when you think the sea and winds will decrease,' he told her.

'According to our satellite reports, not anytime soon.'

'If you don't hear from me again,' said Morton, 'you'll know the worst has happened.'

He switched off as another call came in. 'Mr Morton, this is Captain Rick Tapp of the Odyssey tug fleet.'

'Go ahead, Captain.'

'Sir, I regret to inform you that the tugs *Albatross* and *Pelican* cannot come to your aid. Any attempt would be suicide.'

'I understand,' Morton said heavily.

He was about to leave his office to inspect the battered hotel and reassure the guests when he heard a loud ripping sound and felt the floor lurch beneath his feet as the room twisted on a slight angle. In almost the same instant, his portable communicator buzzed.

'Yes, yes, what is it?'

The voice of his chief maintenance superintendent came over the speaker. 'This is Emlyn Brown, Mr Morton. I'm down in the number-two winch room. I'm looking at the frayed end of a mooring cable. It snapped a hundred yards out.'

Morton's worst fear was becoming a reality. 'Will the others hold?'

'I doubt if they can anchor us for long.'

Morton felt a growing sickness inside him. Disaster would be only minutes away if the hotel began to drift towards the rocky shore of the Dominican Republic.

BARNUM SAT in the pilothouse, and, as *Sea Sprite* took a steep roll to starboard, watched the digital numbers on the clinometer. They showed that she heeled and hung at thirty-four degrees before the numbers gradually drifted back between five and zero.

'Another roll like that,' he muttered to himself, 'and we'll be living under the water permanently.'

How the ship could sustain such wild and savage seas, he could not imagine. Then the numbers on the wind-speed instrument began to drop, until it indicated less than fifty miles an hour.

Maverick shook his head in wonder. 'Looks like we're about to enter the eye of the hurricane, yet the water seems more berserk than ever.'

The communications officer, Mason Jar, a man with bleached white hair and a large earring dangling from his left ear, approached Barnum and handed him a message.

Barnum scanned the wording and looked up. 'This just come in?'

'Less than two minutes ago,' answered Jar.

Barnum passed the message to Maverick, who read it aloud.

'HOTEL OCEAN WANDERER SUFFERING EXTREME SEA CONDITIONS. MOORING CABLES HAVE PARTED. HOTEL IS NOW ADRIFT AND BEING SWEPT TOWARDS THE ROCKS OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC SHORE. ANY SHIPS IN THE AREA PLEASE RESPOND. MORE THAN A THOUSAND SOULS ON BOARD.'

'Judging from the mayday calls,' said Maverick, 'we're the only ship still afloat that can attempt a rescue.'

'They didn't give a position,' said the communications officer.

Barnum looked grim. 'They're not seamen; they're innkeepers.'

Maverick leaned over the chart table. 'She was a long way south of our position when we turned into the storm. Won't be easy coming around to effect a rescue.'

Jar left the pilothouse and minutes later reappeared with another message. This one read:

> TO SEA SPRITE FROM NUMA HQ, WASHINGTON. TRY TO EFFECT A RESCUE OF THE PEOPLE ABOARD OCEAN WANDERER FLOATING HOTEL. I WILL RELY ON YOUR JUDGMENT. SANDECKER

'Well, at least we now have official authorisation,' said Maverick.

'We have forty people on *Sea Sprite*,' said Barnum. 'The *Ocean Wanderer* has over a thousand. I can't in good conscience run away.'

'What about Dirk and Summer down in *Pisces*?'

'They should be able to tough out the storm underwater, protected by the reef.'

'How's their air supply?' asked Maverick.

'Enough for six more days,' replied Barnum.

'If this bloody storm passes, we should be back on station in two.'

'Providing we can hook up with the *Ocean Wanderer* and tow her a safe distance from shore first.'

Maverick looked out of the windshield. 'Once we enter the eye of the storm, we should be able to make good headway.'

'Program in the hotel's last position and predicted drift,' ordered Barnum, 'then set a course for a rendezvous.'

He started to rise from his chair when a monstrous wave rose nearly eighty feet above the pilothouse and came crashing down with unimaginable force. *Sea Sprite* bravely surged through the watery mountain, plunging into what seemed like a bottomless trough before rising again.

Then another wave of even more staggering dimensions immersed the research ship, plunging her into the depths. Crushed under millions of tons of water, *Sea Sprite*'s bow dived down, deeper and deeper, as if she never intended to stop.

three

The *Ocean Wanderer* was now totally helpless. One by one her cables had parted and, free of her moorings, the floating hotel was at the full mercy of the hurricane.

Morton was about to order the ballast tanks filled to higher levels, to settle the hotel lower in the water and lessen the rate of drift, when

the wind suddenly began to slacken. After half an hour it almost died away completely and the sun beamed down on the hotel. People started to cheer, believing the worst of the storm was over.

Morton knew better. Looking through the salt-stained windows, he could see the grey inner walls of the hurricane soaring into the sky. They were now in the hurricane's eye. The worst was yet to come.

He began studying charts of the Dominican Republic shoreline, attempting to predict where the *Ocean Wanderer* might be driven ashore. With luck they would be forced onto one of the many beaches, but his best estimate was that they had a 90 per cent chance of striking rocks.

Morton had never felt so impotent. He was rubbing his tired eyes when his communications operator burst through the door.

'Mr Morton, help has come!' he shouted.

Morton looked at him blankly. 'A rescue ship?'

'No, sir, a helicopter.'

Morton's optimism evaporated. 'What good is a single helicopter?'

'They radioed that they were going to lower two men onto the roof.'

'Impossible.' Then Morton realised that it *was* possible as long as they were in the hurricane's eye. He rushed past the operator and stepped into his private elevator, taking it to the roof of the hotel. As the doors opened and he walked out onto the roof, he was dismayed to see that the entire sports complex had been swept away and all the life rafts had vanished.

Now that he had a clear 360-degree view of the inner hurricane, he was awestruck at its sheer malevolent beauty. And as he looked up he saw a turquoise-coloured helicopter with the letters NUMA painted on the fuselage. The aircraft hovered twenty feet above the deck, as two men in turquoise jumpsuits and crash helmets were lowered by cables to the roof of the hotel. Once they disengaged, two large bundles wrapped in orange plastic came down on another cable. The two men quickly disconnected the hook and signalled an all clear.

The helicopter pilot pulled up the cables and gave a thumbs-up sign as he banked away from the hotel and ascended up through the hurricane's eye.

Seeing Morton, the two visitors approached, carrying the bulky bundles. The taller of the two removed his helmet, revealing thick black hair, greying on the temples. His face was craggy from a life exposed to the elements and his green eyes were edged by mirth lines.

'Please take us to Mr Hobson Morton,' he said calmly.

'I'm Morton. Who are you and why are you here?'

A glove was removed and a hand extended. 'My name is Dirk Pitt. I'm Special Projects Director for the National Underwater and Marine Agency.' He turned to his companion, a shorter man with dark curly hair and heavy eyebrows who looked of Roman descent. 'This is my assistant director, Al Giordino. We came to effect a tow for the hotel.'

'I was told the company tugs could not leave port.'

'Not Odyssey tugs, but a NUMA research ship capable of towing a vessel the size of your hotel.'

Willing to snatch at any straw, Morton motioned Giordino and Pitt into his private elevator and escorted them down to his office.

'Forgive the cold reception,' he said, offering them a chair. 'I was given no warning of your arrival.'

'We haven't had much time to prepare either,' Pitt answered. 'We were on a project off Puerto Rico when Heidi Lisherness from our hurricane centre called us. What is your current status?'

Morton shook his head bleakly. 'Not good. Our pumps are barely staying ahead of the flooding, the structure is in danger of collapsing, and once we run onto the rocks round the Dominican Republic . . . then a thousand people, including yourselves, are going to die.'

Pitt's face hardened. 'We're not running onto any rocks.'

'We'll need the services of your maintenance personnel to assist us in hooking up with our ship,' said Giordino.

'Where is this ship?'

'Our helicopter's radar puts her less than thirty miles away.'

Morton looked out of the window at the walls of the hurricane's eye. 'Your ship will never get here before the storm closes in again.'

'Our hurricane centre measured the eye at sixty miles in diameter and her speed at twenty miles an hour. With a little luck, she'll get here in time. Two hours to reach us and one to make the hook-up,' said Giordino, glancing at his watch.

'There is, I believe,' said Morton in an official tone, 'a matter of marine salvage to discuss.'

'There is nothing to discuss,' said Pitt, annoyed at being delayed. 'NUMA is a US government agency dedicated to ocean research. We are not a salvage company. If successful, our boss, Admiral James Sandecker, won't charge your boss, Mr Spectre, one thin dime.'

Morton was at a loss over how to deal with these men who had dropped from the sky unannounced and calmly informed him they were going to save his hotel. They hardly looked like his salvation. But finally, he acquiesced. 'Tell me what you gentlemen need.'

SEA SPRITE REFUSED to die. She went deeper than anyone would have believed possible, and for agonising seconds seemed to hang suspended in the grey-green void. Then slowly, laboriously, her bow rose as she struggled defiantly back to the surface. Her keel crashed down, jolting every plate in her hull. Then her thrashing screws dug in and propelled her forward. At last her bow thrust into the fury of the storm again, tons of water flowing out across her decks and cascading back into the sea. The tough little ship built to tolerate polar seas and fight the solid mass of ice floes had survived.

Maverick stared through the pilothouse windshield, his face white as a lily. 'That was macabre,' he said. 'I had no idea I'd signed aboard a submarine.'

Suddenly, sunlight beamed into the pilothouse. *Sea Sprite* had broken into Hurricane Lizzie's giant eye.

Barnum glanced at his communications officer, Mason Jar, who was standing braced against the chart table, gripping the railing with ivory knuckles. 'When we come back on keel, Mason, contact the *Ocean Wanderer* and tell whoever is in charge that we're coming as quickly as possible through heavy seas.'

THE SAME PAIR of enormous waves that had buried *Sea Sprite* struck Navidad Bank, crushing its coral reefs. The first also pitched *Pisces* over on her side and sent her tumbling round and round, tossing the occupants about as if they were rag dolls. The submersible rolled for nearly 200 yards before it came to rest, perched precariously on the edge of a narrow coral crevasse. Then the second wave struck and threw her over the edge.

Pisces dropped 120 feet, bumping and grinding against the coral walls during its fall, striking the bottom in a great explosion of sand particles. It landed on its right side and lay wedged between the walls of the crevasse. Inside, everything that wasn't tied down had been thrown in different directions.

Ignoring the pain from a dozen bruises, Dirk crawled over to his sister, who lay in a ball between the bunk beds. He looked into her wide grey eyes and saw sheer fright.

'How was that for a wild ride?' he said with a smile.

She looked up into his face and breathed deeply as her fear subsided. 'During the chaos I kept thinking that we were born together and we would die together.'

'My sister the pessimist. We've got another seventy years to tease each other.' Then he asked with concern, 'Are you injured?'

She shook her head. 'I wedged myself under the bunks and wasn't bounced around as badly as you.' She looked through the viewing bubble at the turmoil above.

'The storm's still raging,' Dirk told her, 'but *Pisces* is sound and leakproof. We'll be safe down here.'

Pleased that Summer had survived the ordeal without injury, Dirk inspected the life-support systems while his sister began tackling the debris. There was no hope of putting everything back where it belonged, not with *Pisces* lying on its side. She simply stacked everything into neat piles and laid blankets over sharp protrusions. It felt strange to be in an environment where everything was turned at a ninety-degree angle.

Summer felt more secure knowing that the storm could no longer threaten them in their deep coral canyon. They were safe until *Sea Sprite* braved the hurricane and returned.

But the expression of confidence she had come to expect was not in her brother's face when he came and sat beside her.

'You look glum,' she said. 'What is it?'

'The fall into the crevasse tore off the lines from the air bottles to our life-support system. According to the gauges, the four tanks that are undamaged will supply us with just fourteen hours of air.'

'What about the dive tanks in the entry lock?'

'Only one was left inside for a valve repair. It contains enough to last the two of us for forty-five minutes at best.'

Summer sighed deeply. 'It looks like our fate is in Captain Barnum's hands. He should be informed of our situation.'

Dirk straightened and put his hands on her shoulders. 'The radio was smashed when we plunged into the crevasse.'

'We could release our homing device,' she said hopefully.

'It was mounted on the side that fell against the bottom. It must have been crushed. But not to worry, Sis,' Dirk said more confidently. 'Barnum will send every diver on board *Sea Sprite* to scour the reef the minute the sea flattens. After all, we're their number-one priority.'

AT THAT MOMENT the *Pisces* and her two crew members were the last thing on Barnum's mind. The waves had dropped and now marched in formation against *Sea Sprite*, pitching her up and down in a continuous motion that became monotonous.

Normally a humorous and friendly captain, Barnum became cold and serious as he contemplated the task staring him in the face. He saw no way he could get a tow line on the *Ocean Wanderer*. Since *Sea*

Sprite had been converted into a research ship, the winch and cable were installed on the stern deck for lowering and lifting deep-water submersibles. They were grossly inadequate for towing a floating hotel with a displacement tonnage greater than that of a battleship.

Barnum's eyes tried to drill through the blowing sheets of rain. 'We'd have her in sight if we could see through this muck,' he said.

'According to the radar she's two miles away,' advised Maverick.

Barnum stepped into the communications compartment and spoke to Mason Jar. 'Have you heard anything from the hotel?'

'Nothing, sir. She's silent as a tomb.'

'See if you can raise them again. Patch onto the bridge speakers.'

'Yes, sir.'

Barnum returned to the pilothouse in time to hear Jar's voice through the speakers. 'This is *Sea Sprite* to *Ocean Wanderer*. We are two miles southeast of you and closing. Please respond.'

There was half a minute of crackling static. Then a voice boomed through the speakers. 'Paul, are you ready to go to work?'

Barnum did not recognise the voice at first. He picked up the radio receiver and spoke into it. 'Who is speaking?'

'Your old shipmate, Dirk Pitt. I'm in the hotel with Al Giordino.'

Barnum was stunned. 'How in God's name did you two come to be on a floating hotel in a hurricane?'

'It sounded like such a swell party, we didn't want to miss it.'

'You know we don't have the equipment to tow the *Wanderer*. What's on your devious mind?'

'We've already formed work crews to help us use the hotel's mooring cables for tow cables. Once you take them aboard *Sea Sprite*, you can join them together, then secure them to your towbit to form a bridle for towing.'

'How do you expect to send tons of cable over to my ship?'

When the reply came Barnum could almost see the devilish grin on Pitt's face. 'We have high apple-pie-in-the-sky hopes.'

The rain abated and visibility increased from 200 yards to nearly a mile. Suddenly the *Ocean Wanderer* loomed dead ahead.

'Just look at her,' said Maverick. 'She looks like a fairy-tale castle.' The hotel seemed regal and magnificent amid the raging sea.

Barnum trained a pair of binoculars on the hotel. 'Her roof deck looks like it was swept clean.'

'A miracle she survived,' muttered Maverick in wonder.

Barnum lowered his glasses. 'Bring us around and set our stern on her windward side. Let's see what Pitt has up his sleeve.'

PITT STUDIED the plans of the mooring cables given to him by Morton. He, Giordino, Morton and Emlyn Brown, the chief maintenance superintendent, were standing round a table in Morton's office.

'How far out from their moorings did cables three and four break?' Pitt asked Morton.

'About two hundred, maybe two hundred and twenty yards out.'

Pitt looked at Giordino. 'That doesn't leave Barnum enough latitude for manoeuvre. And if the *Ocean Wanderer* sinks, Barnum's crew will have no time to cut the cable. *Sea Sprite* will be dragged down to the bottom along with the hotel.'

'If I know Paul,' said Giordino, 'he won't hesitate to take the gamble with so many lives at stake.'

'Am I to understand you intend to use the mooring cables as towing lines?' enquired Morton. 'I was told your NUMA vessel is an ocean-going tugboat.'

'She was once,' replied Pitt. 'But when she was converted from an icebreaker tug into a research ship, the big winch and tow cable were removed. All she has now is a crane for lifting submersibles.'

'Then what good is she?' Morton demanded angrily.

'Trust me.' Pitt looked him in the eye. 'If we can make a hookup, *Sprite* has enough power in her engines to tow this hotel.'

'How will you get the ends of the cables over to *Sea Sprite*?' Brown queried. 'Once they're unreeled, they'll sink to the bottom.'

Pitt looked at him. 'We float them over.'

'Float?'

'You must have fifty-gallon drums on board?'

'Very clever, Mr Pitt. I see what you're aiming at.' Brown thought for a moment. 'We have quite a few that contain oil for the generators, cooking oil and liquid soap.'

'We can use as many empty drums as you can scrape up.'

Brown turned to four of his maintenance crew, who were standing nearby. 'Assemble the empties and drain the rest as quick as you can.'

'As you and your people unreel the cables,' Pitt explained, 'I want you to tie a drum every twenty feet. By making the cables buoyant, they can be hauled over to *Sea Sprite*.'

Brown nodded. 'Consider it done.'

'If four of our cables snapped earlier,' interrupted Morton, 'what makes you think these two will stand up to this stress?'

'For one thing,' Pitt rationalised patiently, 'the storm has abated considerably. Two, the lines will be shorter and less prone to excessive strain. And lastly, we'll be towing the hotel on her narrowest beam.

When she was moored, her entire front face took the brunt of the storm.' He turned back to Brown. 'Next, I'll need a good mechanic to splice loops or eyes to the ends of the cables, so they can be shackled together once they're wound around the *Sprite*'s towbit.'

'I'll handle that chore myself,' Brown assured him.

'We'll also require a few hundred feet of line, thin diameter but with the tensile strength of steel cable.'

'I have two five-hundred foot spools of Falcron line. It's finely woven, thin, lightweight and could lift a tank.'

'Tie two-hundred-yard lengths to the end of each cable.'

'How do you intend to get the Falcron lines to your ship?'

Pitt and Giordino exchanged knowing glances.

'That will be *our* chore,' said Pitt with a grim smile.

THE WORST OF THE FURIES had passed. The hurricane's eye was hours gone and the *Ocean Wanderer* had somehow survived Lizzie's final fury. The winds had decreased to forty knots and the seas had dropped to an average of thirty feet. Hurricane Lizzie had moved westwards to cast her destruction on the Dominican Republic.

Covered head to toe in yellow oilskins, Barnum braved the downpour on *Sea Sprite*'s stern, which was still lashed by heavy rain. He peered through his binoculars at the hotel and observed Pitt and Giordino enter the water and disappear beneath the rolling surface. He could just make out men standing in the doorways, paying out the red Falcron line to the divers struggling below the wild waves.

'Throw out a pair of safety lines with buoys,' he ordered his crew without lowering the glasses, 'and prepare the grappling hooks.'

He watched expectantly, unable now to see Pitt or Giordino under the swirling seas. 'Stop engines,' he ordered his chief engineer. 'There are divers bringing over the cable lines. We have to let the seas carry us within two hundred yards of the divers, narrowing the gap so they can reach us.'

A HUNDRED FEET from the hotel, Pitt briefly surfaced to get his bearings. *Sea Sprite* only showed herself when Pitt rose on the crest of a wave. He noted her position on his compass and ducked back under the surface. The Falcron line in his wake quickly became awkward to pull as the drag increased with each foot that was paid out. Pitt kept his head down and his hands clasped behind his back under the closed-circuit rebreather apparatus, which offered greater freedom of movement than two bulky steel air tanks.

He tried to stay just deep enough below the wave troughs so his progress wouldn't be hindered by the heavy seas. More than once he became disorientated, but a quick glance at his compass set him on the right course again. He kicked his fins with all the strength in his legs, doggedly dragging the line that was digging into his shoulder, gaining two feet and losing one in the strong current.

Pitt's progress became sluggish. He was giddy from deeply inhaling too much oxygen. His heart was pounding from the exertion and his lungs were heaving. He dared not pause or rest, or the current would wipe out all his gains. Another ten minutes of all-out effort, and his strength began to ebb. His mind urged him to try harder, but there was only so much that muscle and flesh could achieve. Out of desperation he began to stroke with his hands and arms in an attempt to take the strain from his numbing legs.

The dark cloud of total exhaustion was creeping over the edge of his vision, when he heard a voice speak his name. 'Keep coming, Dirk,' Barnum shouted through his megaphone. 'We can see you under the water. Surface now!'

Pitt obediently swam upwards and broke the surface.

Then Barnum shouted again, 'Look to your left.'

Pitt turned. No more than ten feet away was an orange buoy on the end of a line leading to *Sea Sprite*. Pitt had about five good strong kicks of his fins left in him, and he gave them to the cause. With a physical relief he had never known, he grasped the safety line, threw his arm over it so that it was firmly embedded under his armpit with the buoy lodged against his back.

At last he could relax as Barnum and his crew pulled him up to the stern. Then they placed the grappling hook under the line three feet behind Pitt, carefully lifted him onto the deck, and removed his mouthpiece and head mask. Taking a deep breath of salt air, he found himself looking up into the grinning face of Giordino.

'Slow poke,' muttered Giordino, still in the throes of exhaustion. 'I beat you on board by a good two minutes.'

'I'm lucky to be here,' Pitt muttered back between gasps.

Pitt and Giordino sagged onto the deck waiting for their breathing to come back to normal.

The Falcron lines were connected to the winch on the crane, and as Barnum gave the signal to Brown, the fifty-gallon drums that supported the mooring cables began to spit out from beneath the hotel. Ten minutes later, the leading drums were bumping against the hull of *Sea Sprite*. The crane lifted them onto the stern deck along with the

ends of both cables. The crew quickly shackled the ends together through the eyes spliced by Brown, and wrapped them round the big towbit mounted in front of the crane.

Barnum hailed his chief engineer. 'Ready in the engine room?'

'Aye, Captain,' came back a heavy Scots brogue.

'Ready for tow, *Ocean Wanderer*?'

'Ready as we'll ever be on this end,' was Brown's reply.

Barnum stood at a control console mounted forward of the big crane, gripped the two throttle levers and gently eased them forwards. Pitt and Giordino and every member of the crew and scientific team stood on either side of him in the rain, staring at the *Ocean Wanderer* in hushed suspense.

Sea Sprite's stern dug in and she began to fishtail, but Barnum quickly adjusted the angle of the thrusters and she straightened. For tortured minutes nothing happened. The hotel appeared to be stubbornly continuing her journey towards a tumultuous death. Below their feet, the engines whined like banshees. Barnum scanned the gauges and dials that registered the stress on the engines.

'I don't know how much more they can take,' he shouted above the noise.

'Run the guts out of them,' said Pitt. 'I'll take responsibility.'

'But if they blow, we end up on the rocks too,' warned Barnum.

Pitt threw him a grin that was hard as granite. 'We'll worry about that when the time comes.'

To those on board *Sea Sprite*, the cause was hopeless. It looked as if the hotel was standing dead still in the water.

'Do it!' Pitt pleaded. 'You can do it!'

IN THE PILOTHOUSE, Maverick anxiously studied the digital speed indicator. The red numerals seemed frozen on zero. He turned his attention to the GPS read-outs. The numbers remained static. He looked down through the rear windows at Barnum standing like a statue at the stern control console, then up at the *Ocean Wanderer*, still beset by the angry sea.

He glanced at the digital anemometer and noted the wind had dropped substantially. 'That's a blessing,' he muttered to himself.

Then, when he looked at the speed indicator again, the numbers slowly clicked over. The digit on the far right was ticking back and forth between zero and one knot.

He snatched up a loudhailer and ran out onto the bridge wing. 'She moved!' he shouted. 'She's under way!'

Nobody cheered, not yet. They had no way of determining movement through the swirling waves. Then Maverick shouted again.

'One knot! We're moving at one knot!'

It was not illusory. The distance between the *Ocean Wanderer* and the rocky coastline was slowly but steadily widening.

Sea Sprite drove forwards with her engines spinning wildly. All eyes were locked on the groaning mooring cables. The ship worked up to a speed of two knots, her bows bucking great clouds of spray. Only after the hotel had been towed nearly two miles off the cliffs and the wild sea had been solidly cheated out of a major catastrophe, did Barnum ease back on the throttles.

THE CREW OF *SEA SPRITE* waved at the joyous passengers on the *Ocean Wanderer*, who were wildly waving back and cheering behind the glass walls.

Barnum, still on the deck in his oilskins, spoke through his headset. 'Mr Maverick? The ship is yours. You have control.'

'Aye, Captain. The bridge has command.'

Barnum turned to Pitt and Giordino. 'Well, gentlemen, you saved a lot of lives today.'

Both Pitt and Giordino looked embarrassed. Then Pitt grinned. 'It was nothing, really. Just another one of our many accomplishments.'

Barnum wasn't fooled by the sarcastic wit. He knew both men well enough to know that they would go to their graves in silence before they boasted of what they did this day. 'You can make light of the magnitude of your actions if you wish, but you did a damned fine job. Now, let's go up to the pilothouse and get out of the wet.'

Before he took a well-deserved rest, Pitt stepped into the communications room and asked Jar to call young Dirk and Summer.

After repeated attempts, Jar looked up. 'Sorry, Mr Pitt. They don't respond. The storm probably damaged their antennas.'

'Let's hope that's all it is,' Pitt said pensively.

He walked down a passageway to Barnum's cabin, where the captain and Giordino were sitting at a table enjoying a glass of rum.

'I can't raise *Pisces*,' Pitt announced.

Giordino tried to reassure Pitt. 'She's built like a tank. No way her hull could be punctured. Not fifty feet below the storm.'

'You're forgetting the hundred-foot waves,' said Pitt. '*Pisces* might have sat high and dry during the passing of a trough, but then could have been smashed off her mounts by a solid wall of water. An impact with exposed rock could have shattered her viewport.'

'Possible,' Giordino admitted, 'but not likely. I specified a reinforced plastic for the viewport that could repel a mortar shell.'

Barnum's phone buzzed and he took a call from Jar. When he rang off he said, 'The *Ocean Wanderer*'s tugs have left port and should arrive on station in another hour and a half.'

Pitt stepped to the chart table and picked up a pair of dividers. He measured the distance between their current position and the X on the chart depicting *Pisces*. 'An hour and a half for the tugs to arrive,' he said thoughtfully. 'Another half-hour to release the mooring cables and be on our way. Two hours, maybe less at full speed, to where *Pisces* first dived. Slightly more than four hours to find its current location. I pray to God the kids are all right.'

SUMMER INHALED and exhaled slowly and shallowly, to conserve air. As she stared out of the viewport at the coloured fish that had returned after the turbulence, she wondered if this was to be her final vision.

'How much air do we have left?' she asked softly.

Dirk checked the gauges. 'Two hours, maybe a few minutes more.'

'What happened to *Sea Sprite*? Why hasn't Paul come for us?'

'The ship is probably out there searching right now,' said Dirk without conviction.

'Do you think they were lost in the hurricane?'

'Not the *Sprite*,' said Dirk in a comforting tone. 'No hurricane could send her to the bottom.'

He turned his attention to repairing the smashed radio transmitter and there was no further talk.

The next two hours dragged. Above, they could see the sun had returned to sparkle the sea. Despite Dirk's obstinacy, he simply could not repair the communications equipment. Finally, he gave up.

He felt his breathing become more laboured. For the hundredth time he scanned the gauges registering the remaining air in the undamaged tanks. All needles stood fixed on zero. Dirk moved over and gently shook Summer, who had drifted off into a light sleep.

Her grey eyes fluttered open.

'Wake up, sleepyhead. We have to start breathing from the dive tank.' He placed the tank between them and passed the mouthpiece of the regulator to her. 'Ladies first.'

THE SUN WAS FALLING below the horizon and dusk was only minutes away. Pitt, Giordino and Cristiano Lelasi, a master diver from Italy, who would help them conduct the search-and-rescue operation, were

gathered in *Sea Sprite*'s conference room, and listening as Barnum described the underwater geology off Navidad Bank, where *Pisces* had originally anchored. The captain paused to glance at a clock.

'We should be on site in another hour.'

'If we arrive at *Pisces*'s position and she's gone,' said Pitt, 'we'll launch our search using the grids programmed into our GPS computers. We'll fan out, and comb the bank towards the west.'

'I'll bring *Sprite* as close as I dare to the reef,' advised Barnum.

'Are there any questions?' Pitt asked Lelasi.

The burly Italian shook his head.

'Then let's get started.'

The divers donned padded wet suits, masks and air tanks, and checked the communication phones. Then, carrying their fins and gear, they filed out to the boarding ladder that hung over the hull. A crewman had lowered a rigid-hull inflatable boat into the water and set the twin outboard motors idling.

The dive team descended the ladder and climbed into the boat. Pitt took the tiller, and eased the twin throttles forwards as soon as the crewman had cast off the lines.

Pitt had programmed *Pisces*'s last known coordinates into his GPS instrument and set a direct course for the site, less than a quarter of a mile away. He leaned on the throttles, sending the little boat whipping over the waves at nearly forty knots.

When the GPS number indicated he was getting close, he slowed and approached their target with the motors idling. 'We should be on it,' he announced.

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, Lelasi slipped over the side with a splash and disappeared. In three minutes he was back on the surface. Gripping a hand rope on the gunnel, he hoisted himself into the boat, then shook his head and spoke through his headphone. 'Sorry, Signore Pitt. *Pisces* is gone. I saw nothing but a few scattered tanks and some debris. The coral appears crushed and broken in a trail towards the west.'

Pitt nodded. 'To save time, we'll search from the surface. Stick your heads over the sides. Al, take the starboard; Cristiano, the port. Guide me along the trail of broken coral. I'll steer by your directions.'

Hanging over the inflatable's rounded hull, Giordino and Lelasi peered through their face masks into the water and traced the path of the storm-swept submersible. While Pitt steered the boat on the course pointed out by Giordino and Lelasi, his mind wandered over the past two years since his son and daughter had shown up on his doorstep.

His body had weathered time well—perhaps the muscles were not as hard as they once were, but his love of the sea and his work with NUMA still consumed him and made him feel life was worth while.

The old drive, the challenge of the unknown, had faded, however. He had a family now, and responsibility. The wild days were counting down. He looked over at Giordino. Their exploits together had become almost mythical, and although they were not particularly close in their personal lives, when they faced overwhelming adversity, they came together as one, each complementing the physical and mental virtues of the other. He smiled to himself remembering what a reporter once wrote about him: 'There is a touch of Dirk Pitt in every man whose soul yearns for adventure. And because he is Dirk Pitt, he yearns more than most.'

'The smashed coral ends fifty feet dead ahead!' Giordino yelled, lifting his head from the water.

In another minute it was Lelasi's turn to shout. 'I have it! I have it!'

'I see it too,' said Giordino. 'It's fallen into a narrow canyon.'

Pitt shut the motors down and nodded at Lelasi. 'Throw out a buoy to mark the position, and mind the boat. Al and I are going down.'

He pulled on his fins and went over the side, entering the water through a cloud of bubbles. From above, as he approached the narrow crevasse, the submersible appeared to be intact, but Giordino motioned towards the entry lock that was smashed and jammed against the coral. Pitt gestured that he saw it too. Then he spied the badly damaged tanks that supplied air to the interior. 'Oh God, no,' he thought as he kicked down. 'Please may they not have run out of air.'

He swung round to face the big viewport and pressed his face mask against the thick Perspex. In the half-light that filtered down from the surface, he could just make out Summer lying inert, with Dirk leaning over her. Pitt's heart leapt when he saw Dirk move. He was passing an air regulator from his mouth to hers. Overjoyed at finding his children alive, Pitt rapped the hilt of his dive knife wildly against the Perspex.

SUMMER LAY in a semi-sleep. She opened her eyes only when it was her turn to take a few breaths through the regulator. The pressure gauge was in the red—the end was now only minutes away. Then she thought she saw a movement beyond the viewport. At first her fogged mind thought it was merely a large fish, but when she heard a rapping sound on the hard surface, she sat up and stared over Dirk's shoulder.

A diver was hovering outside, waving excitedly. Seconds later, he was joined by another diver, who made animated motions.

'Dirk!' Summer cried. 'They're here, they've found us!'

He turned and blinked in dazed relief. Then he recognised the two divers. 'Oh my God, it's Dad and Uncle Al!'

They both placed their hands on the viewport and laughed in exhilaration as Pitt held his gloved hands in the same position outside. Then he took a slate from his belt and wrote two words before holding it up: *YOUR AIR?*

Dirk frantically searched through the jumbled mess inside *Pisces* until he found a pen and paper. He wrote in large letters: *10 MAYBE 15 MINUTES LEFT* and pressed the pad against the port.

'That's cutting it pretty fine,' Giordino said over his headphone.

'Damned fine,' Pitt agreed. For several seconds he hung poised in the water, contemplating the alternatives, then he spoke into his headphone. 'Paul, are you reading me?'

'What can I do?' Barnum answered.

'Is your tool locker equipped with a Morphon underwater bore?'

'Yes, we have one on board.'

'Have it ready on deck when we arrive and make sure the drill is fitted with its largest circular cutting bit. We could also use an extra pair of air tanks with regulators.'

'All will be waiting when you arrive.'

Then Pitt wrote on his slate: *HANG IN, BACK IN 10 MINUTES* and held it up in front of the viewport.

Then he and Giordino rose out of sight and vanished above.

BARNUM HAD THE SPARE tanks and the drill waiting when Pitt rushed back to *Sea Sprite*. As soon as the gear was stowed on the inflatable, Pitt charged back to the buoy floating over *Pisces*.

Lelasi threw out an anchor, as Pitt and Giordino fell back into the water. Pitt allowed the mass of the twenty-pound Morphon drill to drag him to the bottom in little less than a minute. As soon as his feet were firmly planted in the sandy bottom of the crevasse, he pressed the circular cutting edge of the drill against the viewport.

Before he switched the drill to rotate, he wrote on his slate: *WILL DRILL HOLE FOR AIR TANKS. STAY CLEAR OF INCOMING TORRENT.*

Then with precious few minutes to spare, Pitt pushed the drill against the viewport and squeezed the trigger, hoping against hope that the bit would penetrate the reinforced plastic. Pitt pushed against it with every muscle in his legs and arms and was thankful when Giordino added his strength to the effort.

Minute after minute crawled by as the two men leaned against the drill and Pitt could see no movement within the submersible. The deeper into the viewport the bit bored, the faster it penetrated. At last it burst through. They instantly jerked the drill back. Almost before Pitt could switch it off, Giordino was shoving an air tank and a regulator through the ten-inch hole, helped by the water that forced it into the lower air pressure inside.

As Pitt enlarged the hole, Dirk weakly reached out for the regulator and clamped his teeth on the mouthpiece. Two deep breaths and he became fully conscious again. He immediately eased the mouthpiece between Summer's lips, and her eyes fluttered open.

He and Giordino took turns this time to enlarge the hole until it was wide enough for a body to slip through.

'Paul,' Pitt called on his headphone.

'I'm listening,' Barnum answered.

'They'll have to decompress the moment they reach the *Sea Sprite* to remove the nitrogen bubbles from their blood. Is the hyperbaric chamber ready?'

'Ready to receive them the minute they come on board. There's a hyperbaric physician on standby.'

The submersible was nearly filled with water now. Giordino reached in and pulled Summer out. Her brother passed through one of the air tanks and she wrapped her arms round it and inhaled through the mouthpiece of the regulator. Then, suddenly, she waved her hands in a wait signal and disappeared back inside.

She quickly reappeared, clutching her notebooks, computer disks and the digital camera in a watertight plastic bag. Giordino took her by the arm and led her up to the surface. Dirk came next with the second spare tank. Pitt gave him a quick embrace before they ascended together towards the inflatable.

THE STARS GLITTERED like diamonds and the lights of high-rise condominiums beamed as *Sea Sprite* sailed into Fort Lauderdale's Port Everglades, one of the busiest deep-water ports in the world. Alerted by the coast guard, every ship in the harbour blew three blasts of their horn in salute as the research ship passed on her way to the NUMA dock facilities. Her epic rescue of the *Ocean Wanderer* forty-eight hours earlier was worldwide news.

Pitt dreaded the media reception waiting at the dock. As he leaned over the railing on the bow and watched the black water, streaked by flashes of white light, he became aware of a figure beside him. He

turned and looked into the smiling face of his son. The twins had spent over fifteen hours inside the hyperbaric chamber, to avoid decompression sickness, or what is known as the bends.

'Are you and Summer fully recuperated?'

'We passed our balance and comparative sensitivity tests with flying colours,' said Dirk, 'and have no sign of aftereffects.'

'Symptoms can turn up days or weeks later. Better you and your sister take it easy for a while.'

'We need to go back and investigate what we found in the cavern.'

'That can be arranged,' Pitt assured him. 'But all in good time.'

'And the brown crud that's killing the sea life around the bank?' Dirk persisted. 'It can't be ignored.'

'Another NUMA expedition with a new crew will be assembled to return and study the scourge.'

Dirk turned and looked across the port. 'I wish we had more time to spend together,' he said wistfully.

'How about a fishing trip in Canada?' Pitt suggested.

'Sounds good to me.'

'I'll work on Sandecker. After what we all achieved in the past few days, I don't think he'll deny us a little time off.'

four

August 23, 2006, Washington, DC. The air was hot and damp with humidity. The sky was cobalt blue. Except for the tourists, the city simmered at a slow pace in the middle of summer. As Pitt stepped off the NUMA Citation jet that had flown them from Florida to the government airport a few miles north of Washington, Giordino, Dirk and Summer followed him down the boarding stairs to asphalt that felt hot enough to fry Spam.

The only vehicle waiting on the parking strip was a 1931 Marmon town car painted a dusty rose. Beside it stood Congresswoman Loren Smith, tall and captivating, her cinnamon hair glinting in the sun. She waved, smiled and ran over to Pitt, kissing him lightly on the lips. 'Welcome home, sailor.'

'I wish I had a dollar for every time you've said that.'

'You'd be a rich man,' she said with a laugh. Then she hugged Giordino, Summer and Dirk. 'I hear you all had a big adventure.'

'If it wasn't for Dad and Al,' said Dirk, 'Summer and I would be wearing wings.'

'After you settle in, I want you to tell me all about it.'

They carried their luggage and duffle bags to the car, then threw some in the humpbacked trunk and the rest on the floor in the rear. Loren slipped behind the wheel while Pitt moved into the passenger's side. The rest shared the rear compartment behind the divider window.

'Are we dropping Al off at his condo in Alexandra?' she asked.

Pitt nodded. 'Then we can head for the hangar and clean up. The admiral wants us in his office by noon.'

Loren looked down at the clock on the instrument panel. The hands read 10.25. 'No time to relax before going back to work? After what the four of you have been through, isn't he crowding you a bit?'

'He wouldn't insist unless it was important,' Pitt muttered. 'We'll know soon enough what's on his mind.'

Fifteen minutes later, Loren drove up to the gated condominium complex where Giordino lived.

He retrieved his duffle bag and waved. 'See you soon.'

The drive to Pitt's aircraft-hangar apartment at the deserted end of Ronald Reagan International Airport was traffic-free. They were waved through a security gate when the guard recognised Pitt, and Loren pulled up outside the old hangar that had been used in the thirties and forties by a now extinct airline. Pitt had purchased it and remodelled the upper offices into an apartment. Dirk and Summer lived on the ground floor, which also housed Pitt's vintage car collection, a pair of old aircraft and a railroad Pullman car.

Pitt used his remote to disengage the complicated alarm system. The door rose and Loren drove inside and parked in the middle of the incredible array of beautiful, classic automobiles.

Dirk and Summer retired to their compartments in the Pullman while Pitt and Loren went up to his apartment, where he showered and shaved as she fixed a light brunch for the four of them.

Thirty minutes later, Pitt appeared, dressed in casual slacks and golf shirt. 'What do you know about the Odyssey Corporation?' he asked Loren as he sat down at the kitchen table.

She looked at him for a moment. 'I'm on a congressional committee that has looked into its operations. What do you know about our investigation?'

He shrugged. 'Absolutely nothing.'

'Then why did you ask?'

'Curiosity. Odyssey's founder owns the *Ocean Wanderer*.'

'Very little is known about Spectre, other than that he heads a vast scientific research facility in Nicaragua and is involved with huge construction projects and mining operations around the world. Some of his dealings are legitimate, others are very shady.'

'What sort of scientific research projects does Odyssey conduct?'

Loren shrugged. 'Rumour has it they're involved with fuel cell research, but their activities are heavily veiled, and since their facility is in Nicaragua, they aren't bound by law to report their experiments. Our intelligence people don't see Odyssey as a priority investigation.'

'And their construction operations?'

'Mostly underground vaults,' answered Loren. 'A number of their projects are with the Chinese, who want their military research programmes and weapon supplies kept secret.'

'Yet Spectre built and operated a floating hotel.'

'A toy he uses to entertain clients,' explained Loren. 'He's only in the resort business for the fun of it.'

Pitt poured himself a cup of coffee. 'Who *is* Spectre?'

'He's very mysterious. He doesn't have a publicity agent or public relations firm, has never given an interview and is rarely seen in public. No record of his birth has been found in any archive around the world. The FBI tried to get a handle on him a few years ago, but came up empty-handed.'

'Where are his corporate headquarters?'

'Brazil,' replied Loren. 'He also has a huge office in Panama. And because he has made a large investment in the country, the president of the republic made him a citizen. He also appointed Spectre a director of the Panama Canal Authority.' Then she added, 'Another intriguing thing about the Odyssey Corporation is that its top management is almost entirely staffed by women.'

AFTER A LATE BREAKFAST, Pitt and the twins drove to the NUMA building where they were ushered into Sandecker's office on the top floor. Giordino had arrived early; Rudi Gunn also joined them.

Sandecker turned to Dirk and Summer. 'You two seem fit after your ordeal.'

'If Dad and Al hadn't got us out of *Pisces* when they did,' said Summer, 'we wouldn't be standing here.'

Sandecker's eyes were filled with pride. 'Yes, it seems that good-deed-doer's work never ends.'

'Which brings me to a request,' said Pitt, thinking of the fishing trip with his son.

'Request denied,' said Sandecker, reading his mind. 'You people can put in for a vacation as soon as you finish the next project.'

Giordino stared sullenly at the admiral, but Sandecker ignored him, and without further prelude, launched the meeting. 'We have two intriguing problems to deal with. The most important is the brown crud that is spreading throughout the Caribbean, which I'll come to later.' He looked across his desk at Summer and Dirk. 'But first, you two certainly opened up a Pandora's box with your discoveries on Navidad Bank.'

'I haven't heard the test results on the amphora,' said Summer.

'The lab is still cleaning it,' clarified Gunn. 'It was Hiram Yaeger and his computer that established a date and culture.'

'Hiram dated the amphora to between 1200 and 1100 BC,' said Sandecker. 'He also established that it is Celtic.'

'Celtic?' Summer echoed. 'Is he sure?'

'It matches every other amphora known to have been created by ancient Celts around three thousand years ago.'

Dirk looked at his sister expectantly. 'The amphora was not all we found.'

Summer reached into her bag and retrieved the digital camera. 'We also discovered a labyrinth of caverns carved from rock that is now covered with coral. It looked like a temple. We took pictures.'

Sandecker turned to Gunn. 'Rudi.'

Gunn nodded, took the camera from Summer's hand and pushed a switch on the wall that raised a panel to reveal a large digital television. He then connected the camera cable to the TV, picked up the remote and began running through the images recorded by Summer.

Dirk and Summer narrated as Gunn moved from one picture to the next. When the last image flashed onto the monitor, Sandecker looked at the twins.

'Since the Celts were not a seafaring people and are not known to have sailed across the Atlantic, it's a mystery how these artefacts arrived on Navidad Bank. Your research project for the next two weeks is to find answers. Consider it a working vacation.' He swung in his big leather chair to face Pitt and Giordino. 'And now to the matter of the brown crud. All we know at this moment is that it is not associated with algae. Nor is it a biotoxin linked to the red tide phenomenon. What we *do* know is that it leaves a swath of devastation in the Atlantic as it is swept north by the South Equatorial Current towards the Gulf and Florida. Reports coming in from Key West say sponge beds are affected.'

'Any indications where the crud might originate?' asked Pitt.

Gunn pulled off his glasses and wiped the lenses. 'Our scientists have sorted through water samples, wind and current data. Their best guess is that the crud is spawned somewhere off the coast of Nicaragua.'

'The source must be found and a counteraction developed before it spreads,' added Sandecker. 'That's where you and Al come in. Your mission is to investigate the waters off the east coast of Nicaragua. I've lined up one of NUMA's Neptune-class research vessels.'

'A NUMA research ship will stand out in the Caribbean like a street derelict at a debutante ball,' said Giordino dubiously.

'Not to worry,' replied Sandecker with a grin. 'No one will find *Poco Bonito* conspicuous.'

THAT EVENING PITT DECIDED to take everyone to dinner at L'Auberge Chez François in Great Falls, Virginia.

Giordino brought his current ladyfriend, Micky Levy, who worked for a Washington-based mining company. Micky, born and raised in Jerusalem, had long black hair and wide brown eyes, and had obtained her masters degree at the Colorado School of Mines.

'So you're a geologist,' said Summer, after everyone was seated.

'A structural geologist,' replied Micky. 'I specialise in conducting analyses for excavation projects.'

The waiter arrived and Pitt ordered a hearty Pinot Noir. As an appetiser for them all he chose a huge platter of venison, pheasant, rabbit and quail with wild mushrooms and chestnuts.

While they savoured the wine and the game, Summer asked Micky what parts of the world her geological expeditions had taken her to.

She described immense caverns in Brazil and Mexico and then added, 'One of my most fascinating projects was to investigate water levels in the limestone caverns in Nicaragua.'

'I didn't know Nicaragua had limestone caverns,' said Summer.

'They were discovered ten years ago and are quite extensive. Some run for miles. The development corporation that hired me for the study has plans to build a dry canal between the oceans. The engineers called it an "underground bridge".'

'A canal that runs underground?' Loren said sceptically.

'Deep-water container ports in the Caribbean and the Pacific, yet to be constructed, would be linked by a high-speed, magnetic levitation railroad running through huge bores beneath the mountains and Lake Nicaragua, with trains capable of speeds of up to three hundred and fifty miles an hour.'

'You're talking heavy bucks,' said Giordino.

Micky nodded in agreement. 'The estimated budget was seven billion dollars.'

Loren still looked doubtful. 'I find it strange that no reports of such a vast undertaking have been circulated by the Department of Transportation.'

'Or mentioned in the news media,' Dirk added.

'That's because it never got off the ground,' said Micky. 'I was told the development company decided to pull out. Why, I never found out. I signed a confidentiality agreement never to reveal any information on the project, but that was four years ago. And since it has apparently died, I don't mind ignoring the agreement and telling my friends the story over a lovely dinner.'

'A fascinating tale,' Loren acknowledged as the waiter brought their entrées. 'I wonder who was going to put up the financial backing?'

Micky took a sip of her wine. 'My understanding was that part of the funding was to come from the Republic of China. They've heavily invested in Central America. If the underground transportation system had been completed, it would have given them great economic power throughout North and South America.'

Pitt and Loren looked at each other, then Loren asked Micky, 'Who was the construction firm that hired you?'

'A huge international development outfit called Odyssey.'

'There's coincidence for you,' said Loren. 'Dirk and I were discussing Odyssey and its chairman not more than a few hours ago.'

Dirk looked thoughtful. 'Why do you think Spectre decided to break off the project?'

'How do you know he did?' put in Giordino. 'How do you know he isn't secretly digging away under Nicaragua right now?'

'Not possible.' Loren was blunt. 'Satellite photos would show construction activity. There's no way he could hide an excavation of such magnitude.'

Giordino studied his empty glass. 'A neat trick if he could hide millions of tons of excavated rock and muck.'

Pitt looked across the table at Micky. 'Could you supply me with a map of the area where the tunnel was supposed to begin and end?'

Micky was only too happy to oblige. 'You've piqued my curiosity. Let me have your fax number and I'll send you the site plans.'

'What's on your mind, Dad?' asked Dirk.

'Al and I will soon be cruising down Nicaragua way,' Pitt said with a crafty grin. 'We just might drop in and browse the neighbourhood.'

five

A light rain was falling as the small plane set down and taxied towards the main terminal at Bluefields airport, not far from Nicaragua's main Caribbean port.

Pitt followed Giordino down the steps and they hurried across the tarmac to the terminal, where they waited for their luggage to appear. Their instructions from Sandecker said only that a car would be waiting at the entrance. Pitt pulled two suitcases on wheels while Giordino shouldered a big duffle bag, heavy with diving gear, to where five cars and ten taxis were waiting for passengers. Waving away the cabbies, they stood expectantly for a minute, before the last car in line, a battered old Ford Escort, blinked its lights.

Pitt walked up to the passenger's window, leaned in and started to ask, 'Are you waiting for . . .?'

He trailed off in surprise. Rudi Gunn exited the driver's side and came round the car to greet them and shake hands. 'We can't go on meeting like this.'

'The admiral never mentioned you'd be in on the project,' said Pitt.

'I was bored sitting behind a desk so I sweet-talked Sandecker into letting me come along. I left for Nicaragua soon after our meeting. I guess he didn't bother to warn you.'

'He must have forgotten,' Pitt said cynically. He put his arm round Gunn's shoulder. 'It's always a pleasure to work by your side, Rudi.'

They threw their luggage in the trunk and climbed inside the Escort. NUMA's deputy director drove them along the big Bay of Bluefields, which was surrounded by wide beaches. The lagoon, inlets and harbour of the Escondido river delta were crowded with fishing boats.

'It looks as if the entire fishing fleet is in town,' observed Pitt.

'Thanks to the brown crud, fishing has come to a standstill,' replied Gunn. 'The shrimp and lobster are dying off and the fish have migrated to safer water.'

'The local economy must be down the sewer,' said Giordino, slouched comfortably in the back seat.

'It's a disaster. Unless the brown crud dissipates or is neutralised, a lot of people are going to starve.' He paused. 'Things were bad enough before Hurricane Lizzie. Unemployment was sixty per cent. Now it's closer to ninety.'

The Escort rolled towards the commercial dock area at El Bluff. The stench of the harbour was overpowering. Refuse, oil and sewage mingled together in the filthy water, and they passed ships that looked as though they might crumble any minute. The roofs on most of the warehouses looked as if they had been torn away. Pitt noticed that one container ship was unloading large crates with FARM MACHINERY stencilled on their wooden sides. The huge, immaculate semi-trucks and trailers being unloaded seemed out of place in such a sleazy background. The name of the ship, just visible under work lights, read *Dong He*. The letters COSCO stretched along the centre of the hull. Pitt knew it stood for the China Ocean Shipping Company.

'This is their port facility?' asked Giordino incredulously.

'All that's left after Lizzie got through with it,' answered Gunn.

Four hundred yards later the Escort rolled onto an old wooden wharf crowded with fishing boats. Gunn braked to a stop at the only one whose decks were illuminated. The boat appeared to have seen better days. Under the yellow glow, her black paint looked faded and rust streaks ran from the deck.

Pitt's eyes swept the vessel from stem to stern, where the Nicaraguan flag hung limply with its twin horizontal blue stripes bordering one of white. He turned slightly and glanced at a lavender-coloured pick-up truck that was parked beside a nearby warehouse. He could see a dark shape behind the wheel and the red glow of a cigarette through the windshield.

He turned back to the boat. 'So this is *Poco Bonito*.'

'Not much to look at, is she?' Gunn said, as he opened the trunk and helped retrieve the bags. 'But she's powered by twin thousand-horsepower diesels and carries scientific gear most labs would die for. It's a nice job of disguise.'

'This has to be the only vessel in the NUMA fleet that isn't painted turquoise. How did our engineers make her look so . . . so used?'

'Special effects,' Gunn replied, laughing. 'The shabby paint and rust are specially formulated.'

Pitt leapt from the dock onto the deck and turned as Giordino passed over their luggage. The sound of feet thumping on the deck had alerted a man and a woman, who appeared from the rear door of the deckhouse. The man was in his fifties with a neat grey beard and bushy eyebrows. His head was shaven and gleamed with sweat. The other crew member was nearly six feet tall and willowy. Blonde hair, radiant and thick, splashed around her shoulders, her face was tanned, and when she smiled she displayed fine white teeth.

Gunn made the introductions. 'Dr Renee Ford, our resident marine biologist, and Dr Patrick Dodge, NUMA's leading marine geochemist. I believe you know Dirk Pitt, Special Projects Director, and Al Giordino, marine engineer?'

'We've never worked together,' said Renee in a husky voice. 'But we've sat together in conferences.'

'Good to see you again,' said Pitt.

'Likewise,' said Dodge, as he shook hands.

PITT STOOD LISTENING to the water slapping against the pilings. The wharf looked deserted. Almost, but not quite.

He dropped down to his cabin in the stern, removed a small black case from his suitcase and eased back up the stairway onto the side of the deck opposite the wharf. Using the deckhouse as a cover, he opened the case and removed what looked like a video camera. He switched on its transformer and it gave off a muted high-pitched whine. Next, he draped a blanket over his head and slowly rose until his eyes could peer over the deckhouse roof. He pressed his face against the eyepiece of the night-vision monocular as the scope automatically adjusted the infrared illuminator. Then he peered into the darkness across the wharf.

The Chevrolet pick-up truck he'd noticed when arriving at *Poco Bonito* was still sitting in the dark, now illuminated as a greenish image. The ambient light from the stars and two dim lights a hundred yards down the wharf were now enhanced 20,000 times, revealing the driver of the truck as if he were in a well-lit room. But as he studied the driver, Pitt saw that he was a she. He could tell by the way the observer swept her scope back and forth across the lit portholes of the hull that she did not suspect that she had been detected. He could even tell that her hair was wet.

Pitt lowered the scope until it focused on the driver's door, where a name was painted: ODYSSEY. Below the name was the stylised image of a horse running with its legs outstretched. It looked vaguely familiar. But why was Odyssey interested in a NUMA research expedition? Pitt wondered.

He could not refrain from standing up, walking to the wharf side of the boat and waving to the woman in the pick-up, who immediately trained her night-scope on him. Pitt held up his own scope to his eyes and stared back. The woman dropped her scope on the seat, hurriedly kicked over the engine and roared across the wharf into the darkness, spinning her rear tyres.

Farther along the deck, Renee looked up in unison with Giordino and Dodge. 'What was that all about?' she asked.

'Someone in a hurry,' Pitt said in amusement.

A little while later, *Poco Bonito* slipped away from the wharf and churned into the channel that ran to the sea. Gunn took the wheel and guided *Poco Bonito* straight towards the red and green lights on the top of a pair of buoys that marked the entrance to the harbour.

AS PITT SAT in a lounge chair enjoying the tropical evening and watching the yellow glow of Bluefields fade into the darkness astern, the memory of the spy on the dock stayed in his mind and spread, like a plant with roots. There was an indefinite thought that seemed distant and unfocused. He was not concerned that they had been observed as they cast off their moorings. That seemed inconsequential and measured no more than two points on his trepidation scale. It was the haste of the driver when she shot off the dock that puzzled him. There had been no need for a quick getaway. So she was seen by the NUMA crew? So what? They'd made no move to approach her. The answer had to lie elsewhere.

And then it all crystallised when he recalled the driver's wet hair. Abruptly, he sat up and shouted. 'Rudi, stop the boat!'

Gunn half turned. 'What?'

'Stop the boat! Stop it now!'

Gunn quickly complied, pulling the twin throttles leading to the big fuel-injected engines back to their stops.

Then Pitt yelled at Giordino, who was down in the galley with Ford and Dodge, savouring pie and coffee. 'Al, bring up my dive gear!'

Gunn stepped in confusion from the side door of the pilothouse. Looking bewildered, Renee and Dodge also appeared on deck to see what all the fuss was about.

'I can't be certain,' explained Pitt. 'But I suspect we might have a bomb on board.'

'What brought you to that conclusion?' asked Dodge sceptically.

'The driver of the truck couldn't wait to get away. Why the hurry? There must be a reason.'

'If you're right,' spoke up Dodge, 'we'd better find it.'

Pitt nodded decisively. 'Rudi, you, Renee and Patrick search every inch of the cabins. Al, you take the engine room. I'm going over the side in case it was attached under the hull.'

'Let's get a move on,' said Al. 'The explosives could be on a timer set to detonate as soon as we clear the harbour.'

Pitt shook his head. 'I don't think so. Impossible for anyone to predict the precise time we'd reach the open sea. My guess is that when we pass the entrance, a transmitter attached to one of the channel buoys will activate a receiver connected to the explosives.'

'I believe you have overactive grey matter,' Renee said dubiously. 'Who would have a motive to kill us all and destroy the boat?'

'Somebody who's afraid of what we might find,' Pitt continued. 'And for now Odyssey is our prime suspect. Their intelligence-gathering must be good if they saw through the admiral's scheme to smuggle us to Bluefields.'

Giordino appeared from below with Pitt's dive gear. He knew his partner rarely, if ever, misinterpreted events. Their trust in each other was their bond.

'We'd better move quickly,' Pitt advised strongly. 'The longer we hang around, the sooner our friends will know we're onto them. They'll be expecting to see a fireworks display in the next ten minutes.'

They quickly assigned themselves sections of the boat to search while Pitt stripped to his shorts and strapped on his air tanks and regulator. Inserting the regulator's mouthpiece between his teeth, he strapped a small tool kit round his left leg, grabbed a dive light and stepped over the stern.

The water felt warmer than the air above. Visibility was almost diamond clear. He moved under the boat, from the rudder and propellers towards the bow, swinging the light from port to starboard and back. Suddenly the beam caught an object protruding from the keel amidships. He stroked his fins slowly until he was staring at an oval-shaped canister about three feet in length and eight inches wide. It had been attached with adhesive tape to the aluminium hull.

Pitt was no bomb expert, but he knew it was more than enough explosive to blast *Poco Bonito* into a thousand fragments. He clamped the dive light under an armpit, reached into the tool kit strapped to his leg and pulled out a small fisherman's knife. Slipping the edge of the blade under the canister as far as he dared, he sawed through the tape. Whoever had attached the bomb had used enough tape to choke a whale. Though he split the tape in four places, the canister remained stuck to the hull.

Pitt put the knife back in the kit, gripped both ends of the canister, planted his finned feet firmly against the keel and heaved, praying that only an electronic signal would set it off. The canister came off the hull with such momentum that he was hurled nearly six feet before drifting to a stop. It was then that he realised he was gasping for air. His heart

felt like it was trying to beat through his rib cage.

Without waiting for his heart to slow and his breathing to return to normal, Pitt swam along the keel and surfaced at the stern. No one was visible. They were all busily searching the interior. He spat out his mouthpiece and shouted, 'I could use some help!'

Giordino burst through the engine-room hatch and leaned over the transom. 'What have you got?'

'Enough explosives to disintegrate a battleship.'

'You want me to lift it on board?'

'No,' Pitt gasped, as a wave washed over his head. 'Tie a long line to a life raft and throw it over the stern.'

Giordino hurried up a ladder to the roof of the deckhouse and yanked one of the two life rafts out of its cradle. Renee and Dodge appeared on the deck just in time to catch the raft as Giordino let it slide to the deck below.

'What's happening?' asked Renee.

Giordino nodded to Pitt's head bobbing in the water. 'Dirk found an explosive device fastened to the hull. Now give me a hand.'

The three of them manhandled the heavy raft over the railing into the water. Kicking his fins furiously, Pitt rose out of the water up to his chest, lifted the heavy canister over his head and carefully lowered it onto the bottom of the raft.

Giordino dropped the boarding ladder and helped Pitt climb on board. As Giordino removed his air tanks, Pitt said, 'Pour a few gallons of fuel into the raft, then pay out the line as far as it will go.'

'You expect us to tow a raft full of explosives covered in gasoline?' Dodge asked hesitantly.

'That's the idea.'

'What happens when it passes the buoy with the transmitter?'

Pitt flashed a crooked grin. 'Then it will go bang.'

As *Poco Bonito* exited Bluefields harbour, the portside channel buoy blinked red, that on the starboard side, green. Except for Giordino, who took the helm, everyone huddled on the stern deck and peered warily at the life raft, a small orange shape against the black water 150 yards astern. *Poco Bonito*'s hull safely passed the buoys, but the tension mounted as the raft was towed closer and closer. Fifty yards, twenty-five. Renee placed her hands over her ears. Dodge turned his back to the stern, while Pitt calmly gazed aft.

'Soon as she blows,' he said to Dodge, 'switch off our running lights.' He had barely finished giving the order when the raft vaporised.

The explosion thundered and echoed between the bluffs as the concussion rolled across the water and rocked the boat. A great boiling upthrust of white water shot out of a crater in mid channel and the fuel in the life raft burst into a column of flame.

The crew of *Poco Bonito* stared as if hypnotised at the wreckage of the raft raining down from the sky like streaking meteors. Then the night went silent and the water astern closed over the crater and was quiet again.

THE WOMAN in the pick-up truck exhaled a deep breath of satisfaction when at last she heard the distant rumble and saw the brief flash in the blackness nearly two miles away. It had taken eight minutes longer than she had estimated. Perhaps the helmsman was cautious and had sent the boat slowly through the narrow channel, or perhaps there had been a mechanical problem and the crew stopped the boat for a quick fix. It no longer mattered. The job had been accomplished.

A HEADING WAS SET for the Perlas islands. Pitt volunteered to take the midnight to 3 a.m. watch but, for the first hour, it took all his willpower not to fall asleep.

His mind began to create a vision of Loren Smith. Theirs was an on-off relationship that had lasted almost twenty years. At least twice they had come within a shadow of marrying, but both were already wedded to their jobs: Pitt to NUMA, Loren to Congress. Now that Loren had expressed a desire not to run for a fifth term, however, perhaps it was time for him to retire to a less demanding job. He'd experienced so many brushes with death—his luck couldn't last for ever. The problem was that he loved the sea. He couldn't give it up. Somewhere, there had to be a compromise.

He refocused on the current problem of the brown crud. Still only minor traces of it registered on the chemical detection sensors mounted under the hull. At a cruising speed of twenty knots, Pitt estimated that they were now about thirty miles off the town of Tasbapauni on the Nicaraguan coast. He glanced at the instruments again. The needles and digits still stood, unwavering, on zero, and he began to wonder if they were on a wild-goose chase.

Giordino joined him with a cup of coffee. 'Thought you might like a little something to keep you awake.'

'Thank you. You're an hour early for your watch.'

Giordino shrugged. 'I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep.'

Pitt sipped his coffee. 'Al, how come you never got married?'

'What's the old line?' Giordino said. 'I never found the right girl.' The dark eyes squinted with curiosity. 'Why ask me that now?'

'I'm thinking about retiring from NUMA and marrying Loren.'

Giordino looked as if he'd taken an arrow through one lung. 'I'll believe that when the morning sun rises in the west.'

'Haven't you ever wondered about packing it in, taking it easy?'

'Not really,' said Giordino thoughtfully. 'I've never entertained any great ambitions. I'm happy at what I do. I guess I'll keep things just as they are until they wheel me into a nursing home.'

'I can't picture you expiring in a nursing—'

Suddenly, Pitt went silent as the instrument displays came to life and began detecting traces of chemical pollution in the water.

'Looks like we're picking up something.'

Giordino turned for the stairway to the cabins. 'I'll wake Dodge.'

A few minutes later, a yawning Dodge climbed to the pilothouse and began scanning the monitors. He stood back, perplexed. 'This doesn't look like any man-made pollution I've ever seen. I'll run some tests.'

As Dodge quietly began assembling the incoming data and analysing the numbers, Gunn and Renee, aroused by the activity in the pilothouse, joined them and offered to make breakfast.

Half an hour later Dodge spoke again. 'This is the wildest concoction I've ever seen.'

'Any clues to its recipe?' asked Giordino, waiting patiently as Renee filled his plate with bacon and scrambled eggs.

Dodge looked at him solemnly. 'The ingredients are not what you might think. The crud is a cocktail of minerals found in the earth, including toxic elements such as arsenic and antimony. There are heavy traces of magnesium, an indication of dolomitic lime that has dissolved in unheard-of concentrations.'

'What does that suggest?' queried Rudi Gunn.

'The presence of limestone,' Dodge answered. He studied a read-out from a printer. 'Another factor is the gravitational force that pulls minerals in alkaline water towards true magnetic north. Minerals attract other minerals to form rust or oxidation. That is why most of the brown crud has moved north towards Key West.'

Gunn shook his head. 'That doesn't explain why Dirk and Summer were able to study sections of the crud on Navidad Bank on the other side of the Dominican Republic out in the Atlantic.'

Dodge shrugged. 'A portion must have been carried there by wind and currents. What puzzles me is how something with the consistency of silt can bind together in a cohesive mass that doesn't sink to the

bottom.' As he spoke, he made notations in a notebook. 'I suspect sea salinity may play a part.'

'That's not the only odd part of the puzzle,' said Giordino. 'The water temperature is seventy-eight, a good five degrees below normal for this part of the Caribbean.'

'Another problem to solve,' muttered Dodge, wearily.

'You've accomplished a lot,' Gunn told the chemist. 'Rome wasn't built in a day. We'll collect specimens and let the NUMA lab in Washington find answers. Our job now is to track down the source.'

SIX

Dawn broke over an empty sea. The radar disclosed no vessels within thirty miles, and the search for the source of the brown crud went on uninterrupted. Just to be on the safe side, they had run without lights the entire night.

They were now sailing in Bahía Punta Gorda, to which the trail of increasing toxicity in the sea water had led them. So far they had been blessed with good weather—just the slightest hint of a breeze.

The Nicaraguan coastline was only two miles distant, the lowlands a faint line across the horizon. Mist covered the shore and drifted against the foothills of the low mountains to the west.

'Strange,' said Gunn, peering through binoculars.

Pitt looked up. 'What?'

'According to the charts of the bay of Punta Gorda, the only habitation is a small fishing village called Barra del Río Maíz.' He handed the glasses to Pitt. 'Tell me what you see.'

Pitt scanned the shoreline. 'That's no fishing village; it looks like a deep-water container port. I count two ships unloading at a huge dock with cranes, and another two ships anchored, waiting their turn. They're flying the Republic of China red flag. It's a beehive of activity.'

The water in the great bay of Punta Gorda suddenly turned into a sea of ugly brown crud thick as a bowl of oatmeal.

Standing at the helm, Giordino slowed the engines to ten knots while Pitt and Renee pulled aboard several buckets of crud and poured it into glass containers for future analysis in the NUMA labs. They also collected dead sea life they found floating in the contamination, for Renee to study.

Suddenly, Giordino shouted from the pilothouse. 'Off the port bow. Something is happening in the water!'

They all saw it then, a movement in the sea like the thrashing of a giant whale.

Pitt stepped into the pilothouse and examined the readings on the depth sounder. The bottom was coming up rapidly.

'Unbelievable,' muttered Dodge as if hypnotised.

Pitt was outside again, standing on the bow with the binoculars pressed to his eyes. 'It looks as if the sea is boiling,' he said to Giordino through the open window beside the helm.

'The water temperature has taken a jump,' Giordino said. 'It turned to a normal eighty-three degrees in the last mile.'

'A mass of mad mud,' Renee said, as if gazing at a mirage. 'Pretty soon it will become an island—'

'Sooner than you think,' Giordino yelled, hauling the throttles into reverse. 'Hang on. The bottom has come up beneath us.' The boat yawed, but it was too late. The bow struck the rising muck, throwing everyone forwards, and stuck fast. The bow wave died away and the propellers thrashed madly, trying to pull *Poco Bonito* off the mysterious rise.

'Cut the engines,' Pitt ordered Giordino. 'High tide is in another hour. Wait and try then. In the meantime, we'll carry all the heavy material and supplies to the stern of the boat.'

'Do you really think that by moving a few hundred pounds, you'll raise the bow enough to slip off the mud?' asked Renee doubtfully.

Pitt was already hauling a large coil of rope towards the transom. 'Add another seven hundred pounds of bodies, and who knows?'

It took the better part of an hour to stack luggage, food supplies, nonessential equipment and furniture at the back of the stern deck.

Pitt gazed at his watch. 'High tide in thirteen minutes and then the moment of truth.'

'The moment has come sooner than you thought,' said Giordino. 'We have a vessel approaching fast from the north on radar.'

Pitt snatched up the binoculars again. 'Appears to be a luxury yacht.'

Pitt estimated her overall length at 150 feet. Painted lavender, like the Odyssey pick-up truck at the dock, she carried a twenty-foot powerboat and a six-passenger helicopter. When she was near enough, he made out her name in gold letters, *EPONA*. Below the name was the same Odyssey logo of a running horse. A flag flying from the communications antenna also flaunted the golden horse on a lavender background.

He observed several crewmen taking up positions on the long forward deck, weapons in hand. The hair on the nape of Pitt's neck rose as he spotted a rocket launcher.

'She's coming straight for us,' he muttered uneasily.

'How are we fixed for weapons?' Giordino asked Gunn calmly.

'Two M4 carbines with attached 40mm grenade launcher.'

'Nothing heavier?'

'Easily hidden small arms are all that the admiral would allow, in case we were stopped and searched by a patrol boat.'

Pitt said, 'I've got my old Colt .45. How about you, Al?'

'A 50-calibre Desert Eagle automatic.'

'We might not sink them, but we can repel boarders.'

Pitt turned to Renee. 'Bring up the M4 carbines, then go down in the galley, empty whatever bottles you can find and fill them with fuel from the tank on the generator motor. Insert a cloth and twist on the tops.'

'Molotov cocktails?'

'Precisely.'

Renee disappeared below, and Pitt herded everyone else to the edge of *Poco Bonito*'s transom. Giordino took the helm and looked astern. Making certain they all had a firm grip on the railing, Pitt nodded a signal for reverse full power. The mighty diesels reverberated as Giordino pushed the throttles as far as they could go. The boat slewed and fishtailed, but was stuck fast. Even with the crew and a ton of solid substance crammed against the transom, the forward part of the boat had been raised by only two inches. Not enough to break loose.

Pitt hoped for a wave to lift the bow, but no waves came. The brown sea had turned as flat as a newspaper. The engines strained and the propellers dug into the muck, but nothing happened. All eyes had turned to the yacht that was approaching at high speed.

Pitt could now see that she had the twin hulls of a catamaran. 'If we don't get off this mud pile,' he said irritably, 'we'll have a most exasperating complication.'

'Exasperating complication,' Giordino shot back. 'Is that the best you can do?'

Then, to everyone's stunned amazement, Giordino suddenly ran from the pilothouse, scrambled up the ladder to the roof, stood poised for a moment like an Olympic diver, then leapt onto the stern deck between Pitt and Gunn. Call it luck, call it foresight or fate. Giordino's weight and momentum striking the stern deck jarred the boat loose. Sluggishly, inch by inch, she slithered off the unyielding muck.

The corners of Pitt's eyes crinkled. 'Don't ever let me tell you to diet.'

Giordino flashed a broad smile. 'I won't.'

'Now for our getaway,' said Pitt. 'Rudi, take the helm and crouch down as far as you can. Patrick, you take cover behind all this junk on the stern. Al and I will hide under a pile of nets.'

The words were barely out of Pitt's mouth when one of the crewmen on the luxury yacht fired a handheld rocket launcher. The missile soared through the port door of the pilothouse and out of the starboard window before exploding in the water fifty yards abeam.

'Good thing I wasn't in there yet,' said Gunn.

'See what I mean about crouching down?'

Gunn jumped into the pilothouse and spun the wheel, but before he could bring the boat up to speed, another rocket smashed through the side of the hull amidships and struck the starboard engine. Miraculously, it failed to explode, but oil spilling from the shattered engine ignited. Gunn immediately closed the throttle to prevent any broken lines from spraying fuel on the fire.

Dodge dived down the hatch into the engine room and snatched a fire extinguisher from a bulkhead. Pulling the safety pin and squeezing the trigger, he smothered the flames until only a billow of black smoke spiralled through the open hatch.

'Are we taking on water?' Pitt shouted from under the fishing nets.

'It's an ungodly mess down here, but the bilge is dry!' Dodge yelled back between coughing fits.

To those on board the yacht, it looked as though the fishing boat was mortally hit, as they watched the column of smoke billowing from inside her hull. Believing her crew dead or too injured to resist, the yacht's captain backed off on his engines, slowed the vessel and drifted across *Poco Bonito*'s bow.

'Do we still have power, Rudi?'

'Our starboard engine is dead, but the port is still turning over.'

'Then they just made a big mistake,' Pitt said with a cold grin.

Gunn, understanding Pitt's meaning, cut back on the throttle to the good engine, allowing the little boat to stop dead in the water.

The ploy worked. Certain that his victim was about to sink, and seeing no movement on board and smoke still gushing from the hull, the yacht's captain idled closer.

Then a bearded man leaned out of the window of the yacht's pilothouse, and spoke through a loudhailer. 'If you do not abandon your boat, it will be blasted to kindling. Do not attempt to open communications. We have detection equipment on board and will know if you

transmit. You have sixty seconds to take to the water. I promise you safe passage to the nearest port.'

'Maybe we should do as he says,' muttered Dodge, as Renee returned on deck, carrying jars and bottles filled with gasoline.

'Say when,' yelled Gunn to Pitt, in a voice edged with anticipation.

'Light the wicks and get ready to toss the cocktails as soon as we collide,' Pitt instructed Renee. 'We're going to ram her.'

The yacht was now less than 100 feet away. There was no more hesitation. Giordino threw Pitt one of the M4 carbines and they began blasting away. Giordino fired into the yacht's pilothouse, while Pitt fired at the crewman holding the rocket launcher, taking him out with his second shot. Another man picked up the weapon, but Pitt cancelled him out too.

Stunned that the innocent-looking fishing boat was fighting back, the crew of the yacht dashed for cover. Giordino did not know it, but he had put a bullet in the shoulder of the captain, who had fallen out of sight. In the same shower of shells, the helmsman was dropped, and the yacht began to lose steerage and angle away. With only one engine, *Poco Bonito*'s speed flattened out at less than half her top speed, but she thrust her bows through the water with more than enough power to do the job.

Renee and Dodge didn't have to be told to sit against the bulkhead with their arms over their heads. In the pilothouse, Gunn stood firm, hands clutching the wheel, knuckles turning ivory. Pitt and Giordino laid aside their carbines and braced themselves for the collision.

The yacht loomed up and blocked out the sun. Then everything seemed to go into slow motion as *Poco Bonito* sliced into the big catamaran with a dull, lingering crunch, demolishing the engine-room bulkhead on her starboard hull.

Renee and Dodge stood and hurled their flaming fuel-filled bottles. One bounced on the teak deck without breaking, another smashed and ignited a ball of fire that spread down the side of the yacht.

Even before the research boat had lost her momentum, Gunn pulled the throttle into full reverse. For several tormented seconds, *Poco Bonito* hung there, her shattered bows driven six feet into *Epona*, caught like a fist in a vice, propeller flogging the water convulsively. Ten seconds, fifteen seconds, then twenty. At last, with a great shriek, her crumpled bow pulled free, leaving the brown crud to gush into *Epona* like a raging river. The yacht immediately began to list sharply.

Two of *Epona*'s crewmen, protected on the opposite hull, recovered and began firing automatic weapons at *Poco Bonito*. Their aim was

low because of the downward list of the starboard hull, and bullets splashed the water around the research boat's hull.

Pitt and Giordino fired blindly into the smoke and flame until resistance aboard the yacht faded away. The catamaran was settling deeper in the water now.

'Pull alongside her,' Pitt ordered Gunn. 'Close enough for me to jump aboard.'

Gunn eased the badly damaged boat towards the yacht, which was aflame from bow to amidships. Meanwhile, Giordino laboured furiously in the engine room, making repairs to keep the boat afloat and under power. Renee cleared the deck of any useless fishing equipment and threw it over the side. Dodge went below, dragging a portable pump, and attacked the rising water streaming into *Poco Bonito*'s smashed bow section.

As Gunn manoeuvred *Poco Bonito* alongside *Epona*, Pitt waited until they nearly touched before he stood on the railing and leapt aboard, landing on the yacht's deck behind the main dining salon. Thankfully, the breeze was blowing the fire forwards and the aft section had not yet suffered the effects of the blaze. If he were to find anyone alive, he had to move fast.

He ran through the dining salon and found it empty. A fast search through the staterooms below failed to turn up any sign of a crew member. He tried to go up the carpeted stairs to the pilothouse, but a wall of fire drove him back. The acrid smoke seeped into his lungs, and his eyes burned. He was about to abandon the search when he stumbled over a body in the galley. He reached down and was stunned to find that it was a woman wearing a bikini. Hoisting her over his shoulder, he stumbled out onto the stern deck, coughing and wiping the tears from his eyes.

Gunn moved the boat closer to the yacht until their hulls bumped. Then he rushed from the pilothouse and took the limp shape that Pitt passed across the railing. The heat from the flames was blistering the paint on the sides of the research boat. Gunn laid the woman gently on the deck before hurrying back to the helm and moving *Poco Bonito* away from the flames. Barely able to see, Pitt felt her pulse and found it was regular. He brushed back the hair from her forehead and found an egg-sized bump. He assumed that she had been knocked unconscious during the collision.

As his eyes cleared, he saw that she was very attractive. She had long, straight red hair and the lithe body of a dancer. Her face was beautifully sculpted, with full, sensual lips.

Renee rushed over. 'Help me get her down below,' she said. 'I'll take care of her.'

Pitt carried the woman down to his cabin and laid her on his bunk. 'She has a nasty bump on the head,' he said, 'but I think she'll come round. You might give her air from a dive tank to help clear the smoke from her lungs.'

Pitt returned topside just in time to watch the end of the yacht.

Her once lavender-coloured hull, now blackened by the fire, was slipping under the brown water leaving behind a swirling spiral of steam and smoke. The last sight of her was the pennant with the golden horse.

AN HOUR LATER, Pitt entered the pilothouse. 'We can get under way now, Rudi. Our patch seems to be working.'

Together, he and Giordino had spread a weighted tarpaulin over the damaged section of the bow, greatly reducing the flow of water.

'Lucky the computerised navigation controls survived intact,' said Gunn. 'I've programmed in a course for Costa Rica. We can make the necessary repairs there for the trip across the sea to the NUMA boat-yard at Fort Lauderdale.' He dabbed a cloth at a trickle of blood that was oozing from a cut on one cheek. 'Do you want to contact the admiral and give him a report, or should I?'

'I'll take care of it.'

Pitt went to the galley and sat down at a computer used by the crew mostly for email home and occasional research on the Internet via satellite. He typed in the name of the yacht, *Epona*, and waited. Within a minute, an image of a horse and a brief description came on the screen. Pitt absorbed it, then shut down the terminal.

He met Renee in the passageway. 'How's she doing?'

'If it was up to me, I'd throw her into the sea. Within seconds of coming awake, she began giving me a hard time.'

Pitt pulled his old Colt .45 from a holster on his belt. 'Let's play *Let's Make a Deal* with her.'

He stepped into the cabin and approached the mystery guest, pushing the gun barrel against her nose. 'I'm sorry, sweet stuff, but we can't leave any witnesses around.'

The amber-brown eyes flew wide, staring at the gun. 'No, no, please!' she cried out. 'Don't kill me! I have money. Let me live and I'll make you rich.'

'We might find it in our hearts not to feed you to the sharks if you tell us why the *Epona* crew chased us and tried to sink our boat.'

'I can only tell you what I know!' the woman gasped.

Pitt saw a strange glint in her eyes that did not indicate trust.

'We're listening.'

'The yacht belonged to my husband and me,' she began. 'We were on a cruise through the Panama Canal and up to San Diego when we were approached by what we thought was an innocent fishing boat. The captain asked for medical supplies to treat an injured crewman. Unfortunately, my husband fell for the ruse and before we could react, those guys—those pirates—had boarded our boat.'

'Before we continue,' said Pitt. 'My name is Dirk Pitt and this is Renee Ford.'

'I'm rude for not thanking you for saving me. I'm Rita Anderson.'

'What happened to your husband and crew?'

'They were murdered and their bodies thrown in the sea. I was spared because they thought I would be useful in luring passing boats. They thought that seeing a woman on the deck in a bikini would attract them close enough to be attacked and captured.'

Pitt looked sceptical. 'Do you have any idea where they came from?'

'They were local Nicaraguan bandits turned pirates. My husband and I had been warned not to sail through this area, but the sea along the coast looked peaceful.'

'Where were you when we collided with the yacht?' asked Renee.

'I was locked in my cabin. I heard explosions and gunfire. Then came a great shock and the boat shuddered, followed by fire. The last thing I remember was the wall of my cabin crashing in around me. When I woke up, I was here on your boat.'

Pitt decided to go for the jugular, watching closely for a reaction. 'What is your connection with Odyssey?' he said suddenly.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Your boat bore the same image of a horse as the Odyssey logo.'

The immaculately plucked eyebrows pinched fractionally. 'Who are you people?' she suddenly demanded. 'You're not fishermen.'

'No,' Pitt said slowly. 'We're with the United States National Underwater and Marine Agency on a scientific expedition to find the source of the brown crud.'

The calm composure abruptly fell away and she blurted, 'Not possible. You're—' She stopped.

'Supposed to be dead from the explosion in Bluefields Channel?' Pitt finished for her.

'You knew?' Renee gasped. 'But why? What did we do to deserve a horrible death?'

Rita would say no more. The expression on her face altered from surprise to anger mixed with hatred.

Renee would have loved to have rammed her fist into Rita's face. 'What will we do with her?'

'Nothing,' Pitt replied with a shrug. He knew that Rita had said all she was going to say. 'Keep her locked in the cabin until we reach Costa Rica. I'll have Rudi call ahead and have the local law authorities waiting on the dock to take her into custody.'

EXHAUSTION CREPT UP on Pitt. He was dead tired, but so were the others. He had one more chore to perform before he could catnap. He stretched out on the deck, leaned his back against a bulwark and dialled his satellite phone.

Sandecker sounded angry. 'Why haven't I heard from you people before now?'

'We've been busy,' Pitt muttered. Then he spent the next twenty minutes bringing the admiral up to speed. Sandecker patiently listened without interrupting, until Pitt ended by relating his conversation with Rita Anderson.

'What could Spectre possibly have to do with any of this?' Sandecker's voice sounded confused.

'My best guess is that he has a secret he wants to keep and will murder the crew of any boat that stumbles into his realm.'

'I'll order an investigation into Odyssey's activities.'

'You might also check out Rita Anderson and a yacht named *Epona*.'

'I'll put Yaeger on it first thing. Did you discover a source of the brown crud?'

'We homed in on the position where it's rising from the sea floor. Patrick Dodge says it has to be an artificial upwelling. There's something nasty going on here that borders on *The Twilight Zone*.'

'Then we're back to square one,' said Sandecker. 'I've sent a NUMA jet transport to the airport near the Río Colorado Fishing Lodge in Costa Rica, with a crew who will patch up *Poco Bonito* before they sail it north. Gunn, Dodge and Ford will be transported back to Washington. I'd like you and Al to join them.'

'But, Admiral, the job isn't finished. I have a little expedition I'd like to carry out.'

Sandecker didn't argue. He'd learned long ago that Pitt's judgment was generally on the money. 'What is your plan?'

Pitt stared across the sea towards the green, forested mountains

rising beyond white, sandy beaches. 'I think a cruise up the San Juan River to Lake Nicaragua might be in order.'

'What do you expect to find, so far from the sea?'

'Answers,' Pitt answered. 'Answers to this whole mess.'

IF THERE WAS ONE small benefit from Hurricane Lizzie, it was that she had swept the brown crud away from Navidad Bank. The water over the coral was once more blue-green and the fish had taken up residence again.

Another research ship had replaced *Sea Sprite* for the investigation of the sunken rooms. Built and designed as a dive support vessel for archaeological exploration in shallow water, *Sea Yesteryear* was fully equipped for diving operations. A spacious laboratory occupied her bow section and she carried a crew of four and a team of ten scientists.

Dirk stood in the laboratory with his sister at his side, examining the artefacts that had been carefully transported from the rooms of stone and immersed in open tanks of sea water in preparation for the lengthy conservation process. He gently held up an exquisite gold torque, the neck ornament that had been found on the stone bed.

'Every relic we've removed has belonged to a woman.'

'It's even more intricate than much of the jewellery produced today,' said Summer, admiring the gold torque.

'Until I can make a comparison with archaeological records in European archives, I'd have to date it as middle Bronze Age.' The soft voice belonged to Dr Jeffrey Parks, who carried himself like a wary wolf, with his face low and thrust out. He had been invited on the expedition by Admiral Sandecker because he specialised in underwater remains.

Parks walked past the tanks that held the ancient relics and stopped at a large board mounted on a bulkhead, which displayed more than fifty photos of the interior of the underwater edifice. He paused, and with the eraser end of a pencil tapped a montage of photos showing the floor plan. 'What we have is not a city or fortress—no structures extend beyond the rooms of your original discovery. Call it a mansion that became the tomb of an elite woman. Perhaps a queen or a high priestess.' He tapped his pencil on a close-up of the bronze body armour. 'And she must have been a warrior.'

'Pity there is nothing left of her,' said Summer. 'Not even an indication of her skull. Even her teeth are gone.'

Parks nodded. 'Her bones disappeared centuries ago, after the structure was inundated by the sea.'

'How in the world did she come to be here?'

'I haven't a clue,' said Parks. 'As a traditional archaeologist, I'm not supposed to believe in diffusion, the contact between the Americas and other parts of the world before Columbus.'

'But it *was* possible for ancient seafarers to cross the sea.'

'No one says it was *im*possible. People have crossed the Atlantic and Pacific in boats made out of cowhide, and it's conceivable that fishermen from Japan or Ireland were blown by storms to the Americas. Archaeologists agree that there are many curious pieces of evidence that suggest European and Asian influence throughout Central and South American art and architecture.'

Summer frowned. 'Could the answers still be down in the rooms?'

'Maybe,' Parks admitted. 'Our marine biologists are running tests on the encrustation on the walls while our phytochemist examines the remains of plant life in an effort to determine how long the building was covered by the sea.'

Summer looked lost in thought. 'Could there be inscriptions under the encrustation, something the archaeologists might have missed?'

Parks laughed. 'The early Celts left behind no written records or art depicting their culture. Finding carved inscriptions would be implausible, unless, of course, we're wrong in our dating.'

Dirk looked at Summer. 'Why don't you and I dive first thing tomorrow morning and search the walls for inscriptions? Besides, I think it only fitting that we pay our respects to our high priestess for the last time.'

ONLY YESTERDAY, the ship's scientists were probing every nook and cranny of the ancient structure. Now Dirk and Summer had the submerged rooms all to themselves. As planned, they began their search in the first chamber, scraping away with putty knives in long horizontal bands four to five feet from the floor, until they reached bare stone.

After an hour of fruitless inspection, they returned to *Sea Yesteryear* to replace their nearly empty air tanks. Twenty minutes into their second dive, after they moved from the first chamber to the entrance shaft, Summer suddenly tapped the handle of her knife on the wall to attract Dirk's attention. He swam to her side and stared at the section of the wall she was excitedly pointing at.

She had found exposed images carved in the stone.

Dirk gave a thumbs up in elation. Together, they cleaned the encrusted stones with their gloved hands and fingers, working cautiously so they did not damage the precious images that slowly

materialised in the gloom on both sides of the shaft, in two bands two feet wide and about five feet off the floor.

Dirk and Summer hung in the water and stared in awe at the carvings of battle scenes with much carnage and strange-looking soldiers with large round eyes and thick moustaches. Their weapons consisted of long daggers, short swords and battle-axes. Some rode in chariots, but most fought on foot.

Other scenes showed ships leaving a burning city. Then the ships were tossed about by storms, followed by land battles with odd creatures. Farther along, there was only one ship left, the rest having been destroyed. Then it too was depicted sinking in a storm. Near the end, an image showed a man and woman embracing before he sailed away on what looked like a raft with a sail.

Dirk and Summer gazed at each other through their face masks in exhilaration. Never had they imagined that they would find anything so extraordinary.

AS THE *POCO BONITO* passed through the mouth of the San Juan River in the early afternoon, the NUMA crew stood on the deck and waved to the small fishing boats that darted past, outboard motors buzzing like a swarm of hornets. Keeping to one side of the river, Gunn angled round a slight bend and headed to a dock that led to a covered walkway bordered by flowers.

Pitt jumped onto the dock and tied off the lines. They stayed close to the boat until their papers were checked by the local border guards, who were surprised at the damage suffered by *Poco Bonito*. Renee, whose mother was Spanish, used the language to spin a wild story of how they had escaped a fleet of drug-smuggling pirates. Since the incident happened in Nicaraguan waters, the guards didn't request a report.

Rita Anderson, on the other hand, would have created a sticky problem. She had no papers and, since Pitt and Gunn had no wish to explain her presence on their boat, they had bound and gagged her before cramming her into a storage closet in the engine room.

The guards made a cursory inspection of the boat, but had no desire to stain their starched and neatly pressed uniforms in the engine room after seeing Giordino emerge coated in oil. After they had walked up the dock out of earshot, Dodge turned to Pitt. 'What are we going to do with Mrs Anderson?'

Pitt kept his eyes trained on the guards as they climbed into a Land Rover and drove away. 'Admiral Sandecker has contacted the

Costa Rican authorities who have agreed to take her into custody and investigate her identity. They should be along any time.'

Renee stepped onto the the ladder leading to the cabin. 'I'd better get our princess ready for her incarceration.'

She had no sooner dropped out of sight than a man strode briskly down the walkway and onto the dock. Though decidedly Latin American, he looked like Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot—the same black, slicked-back straight hair, thin, immaculately trimmed moustache and soft, dark eyes. 'Police Inspector Gabriel Ortega. Your Admiral Sandecker alerted me of your situation. I hope you will accommodate me with a detailed report of your adventures.'

Pitt nodded. 'Count on it, Inspector.'

'Where is this woman you saved from the pirate ship?'

'Down below.' A concerned frown crossed Pitt's forehead. He turned to Giordino. 'Al, why don't you drop below and see what's keeping Renee and our guest?'

Giordino wiped his hands on an oily rag without comment and disappeared below. He was back in less than a minute, his face a mask of wrath, his dark eyes bleak. 'Rita is gone and Renee is dead!' he said. 'Murdered.'

Everyone stared at Giordino in stunned disbelief.

'Renee is dead,' Giordino repeated in a daze. 'Rita murdered her.'

Pure rage flooded Pitt. 'Where is Rita?' he demanded.

Giordino's face had the look of someone who had woken up from a nightmare. 'She's gone.'

'May I see the body?' Ortega asked.

Pitt was already dropping down the ladder. 'This way, inspector. The women were in my cabin below.'

Pitt felt a flood of guilt at not having recognised Rita as a woman capable of murder. He cursed himself for sending Renee alone to release her killer. Then, as he entered the cabin, he muttered, 'Oh God, no!' under his breath. Renee had been stripped naked, and lain on the bed with her arms outstretched in the shape of a cross. The image of the Odyssey logo was carved into her stomach.

RITA HURRIEDLY MADE her way through the jungle, staying close to the river bank and following signs until she reached the Río Colorado Fishing Lodge. In her bikini, she'd fit right in with the other women lying around the swimming pool.

Ignoring the stares of the attendants, she snatched up a towel from an empty lounge chair and draped it over a shoulder. Then she

stepped along the walkway between the lodge's rooms. Finding one where a maid was cleaning the room, she stepped inside.

'*Tome su tiempo*.' She told the maid to take her time, acting as if it were her room.

'*Me casi acaban*,'—'Your room is finished'—the maid replied, as she carried the dirty towels to a cart on the walkway and closed the door.

Rita sat at the desk, picked up a phone and requested an open line. When a voice answered, she said, 'This is Flidais. We have an unexpected problem.'

Ten minutes later, Flidais, alias Rita, left the lodge wearing a flowered print summer dress and sandals. She had also found a pair of sunglasses, a scarf, which she had tied on her head to hide her red hair, and a handbag containing $800, a few Costa Rican *colones*, and a passport in the name of Barbara Hacken. Despite the difference in age and hair colour, she and Hacken could pass as sisters.

When her taxi reached the gate to the airport, a security guard stepped from a small office.

'Are you leaving Río Colorado?' he asked Flidais.

'Yes, I'm on a shopping trip to Managua. I return in the morning.'

'Passport, please?'

She handed him Barbara Hacken's passport and sat back.

The guard glanced at the photo. Satisfied, he handed back the passport and waved the car through.

A short while later, everyone within a mile of the airport stared in awe as a lavender-coloured private plane came in low over the trees and set down smoothly on the airstrip. Minutes later, Flidais was aloft and bound for Panama City.

seven

The two men casually lolling in what the native villagers called a *panga* looked like any of the local men who fished the San Juan River. They wore baggy white shorts and T-shirts with soft, white, baseball-style caps. Two outriggers hung over the *panga*'s stern, their lines trolling for the fishermen's next dinner.

No one on shore would have guessed the lines carried no hooks.

Pitt and Giordino had purchased the flat-bottomed, twenty-foot vessel, whose bows were painted with the name *Greek Angel*, along

with fuel and supplies, within hours of the NUMA jet taking off for Washington with Rudi Gunn, Patrick Dodge and Renee Ford's body on board. A repair crew was working to make *Poco Bonito* seaworthy for the voyage north.

Once Inspector Ortega had learned of Barbara Hacken's missing passport, and had interrogated the airport security guard, he was certain that Rita had fled to the United States, and that she was in the Odyssey camp. He vowed to pursue Renee's murderer internationally and to seek the cooperation of American law enforcement.

Pitt relaxed back into a raised chair in front of the wheel column, and steered the boat with one foot as they passed up the calm river through the tropical rain forest. Giordino sat with his feet hanging over the bow, warily eyeing the occasional eighteen-foot crocodile sunning itself on the bank.

The muddy waters of the San Juan River served as the meandering borderline between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. From here, it was another fifty miles upriver until they reached the town of San Carlos on Lake Cocibolca, better known simply as Lake Nicaragua.

'I've yet to see any signs of construction,' said Giordino, studying the shoreline through a pair of binoculars.

'You've already seen it,' said Pitt, watching multicoloured birds nesting in the trees, whose branches reached over the flowing water.

Giordino turned and stared at Pitt over the rims of his sunglasses. 'Run that by me again.'

'Your friend Micky Levy, remember? Over dinner she talked about plans to build an "underground bridge", a railroad tunnel system that was to travel through Nicaragua between the oceans.'

'She also said the project was never launched because Spectre pulled out.'

'A deception. After the engineers and geologists, like your friend Micky, finished their survey, Odyssey officials insisted they sign confidentiality agreements, threatening to withhold any payment until they agreed. Then they announced that, after studying reports, they had decided the project was impractical and the cost prohibitive.'

'How do you know all this?'

'I called Micky just before we left Washington and after she faxed me the proposed site plans,' Pitt said casually. 'I asked her a few more questions. Didn't she tell you?'

'I guess she forgot,' muttered Giordino.

'Anyway, it turns out Spectre never had any intention of dumping the project. His engineers have been digging furiously for more than

two years. This is borne out by the port we passed, where container ships were unloading what was probably mining equipment.'

A light suddenly flashed on in Giordino's head. 'The brown crud?'

'The million-dollar answer,' Pitt acknowledged. 'Satellite photos never showed construction activity because there was none to be seen. And the only way Spectre could have hidden millions of tons of dirt and rock was to pump it into the sea. A neat trick.'

Giordino opened a beer and rolled the cold can across his forehead. 'Why would Spectre go to such great lengths to cover up the project? Where is the gain if it was built to transport goods and materials from sea to shining sea but no one knows it's there?'

Pitt took a beer from Giordino and pulled the tab. 'If I knew that, we wouldn't be cruising up the river, swimming in our own sweat.'

'What do we hope to find?'

'An entrance, for one thing. They can't completely hide men and equipment going in and out of the tunnels.'

'You think we'll find it on our jungle ride on the *African Queen*?'

Pitt laughed. 'Not on, but under. According to Micky's site plan, the excavation would have run under a town called El Castillo halfway up this river. Tunnels of extreme length require ventilation shafts and El Castillo is an ideal site for such a shaft—an isolated community, with no roads in or out. The main attraction is an old Spanish fortress.'

'And you think a ventilation shaft pops up where everybody in town can see it,' Giordino said dubiously. 'Seems to me the jungle is a more ideal hiding place.'

'No doubt most are hidden in the jungle, but I'm counting on them constructing one that comes up near civilisation in case they have to use it for an emergency evacuation.'

The scenery along the river was so spectacular, the two men fell into silence. They spotted white-faced spider monkeys jabbering at jaguars lurking under the trees. Anteaters ambled through the vegetation, keeping a safe distance inshore from the crocodiles. Toucans and multi-hued parrots flew amid rainbows of butterflies and orchids.

Pitt kept the *Greek Angel* at a steady five knots, and it was four o'clock in the afternoon when they turned off the San Juan River onto the Bartola River. They cruised a short distance before docking at the Refugio Bartola Lodge, and registering for two rooms.

After cleaning up, they headed for the bar. Pitt ordered a tequila on the rocks and Giordino opted for Scotch. The waiter brought the drinks and asked if they were ready to be seated for dinner. They nodded and followed him into the dining room.

They had just sat down when, suddenly, it felt as if the earth was twitching. The ice in their glasses tinkled, and the contents quivered.

'Do you often experience earth tremors here in the jungle?' Pitt asked the waiter.

'Oh, *sí, señor*. But not until two, maybe three years ago when they move up the river.'

'The tremors move?' asked Giordino, puzzled.

'*Sí*, very slowly. They started at the mouth of the river at San Juan del Norte. Now they shake the jungle above El Castillo.'

Giordino sighed. 'Where is Sheena the Jungle Queen when you need her?'

'The gods will never let man find their secret, not in the jungle,' said the waiter. 'No man who goes in comes out alive.'

'When did men start disappearing in the jungle?' asked Pitt.

'About a year ago, a university expedition went in to study the wildlife, and vanished. No trace of them was ever found. The jungle guards its secrets well.'

Pitt looked at Giordino and they both cracked tight smiles.

'Oh, I don't know,' Pitt said slowly. 'Secrets have an intriguing habit of eventually being revealed.'

AT ELEVEN the next morning, Pitt and Giordino loaded up the *Greek Angel* with their gear and a few sandwiches from the kitchen and shoved off into the river. The engine caught on the first flick of the starter and they headed out of the lagoon into the main current of the San Juan. The jungle soon gave way to more open land enhanced by green, rolling hills.

El Castillo was only four miles upriver and they crawled along, rounding the final bend an hour later before passing under the colonial fortress that loomed above the town. El Castillo de la Imaculada Concepción had been built by the Spanish conquistadores. With bastions at each of its four corners, the moss-covered ruins of the castle were in amazingly good shape after withstanding the onslaught of torrential rains for 400 years. And the picturesque little town below, with its roofs of red tin and colourfully painted *pangas* littering the river bank, seemed an inviting oasis.

Except for river traffic, the village of El Castillo was detached from the rest of the world. There were no roads in or out; the residents survived by farming the encircling hills, fishing, or working in the sawmill and palm oil factory twelve miles up the river.

Pitt and Giordino tied up the *panga* at a small dock and walked up a

dirt road towards a little bar and restaurant. They saved their sandwiches for the coming night's excursion and ordered a lunch of fresh fish, downed with local beer.

The owner, whose name was Aragón, waited on their table. 'Will you be staying long in El Castillo?' he asked.

'We'd like to spend a day here and see the ruins of the fortress,' said Pitt.

Aragón stiffened and looked furtively through a window. 'I am sorry, señor, but you must miss it. The government closed it down as too dangerous for tourists. The guards do not allow anyone within ten yards of the fence. They have security cameras and guard dogs, too.'

Giordino took a swig of his beer. 'First time I ever heard of the Nicaraguan government keeping tourists out of a museum because it might fall down.'

Aragón shrugged. 'All I know is what the police from Managua told me. Do you gentlemen wish to stay here tonight?'

'No, thank you,' answered Pitt. 'I'm told there are rapids upriver and we'd like to pass through while it's still light.'

'Boats rarely overturn in the rapids if people are careful and stay inside the channel.'

'Does your restaurant serve steak?' Pitt enquired.

'*Sí, señor*. Do you wish more to eat?'

'No, we'd like to take the meat with us for later. Once we pass through the rapids, my friend and I will camp onshore and cook dinner over a fire.'

Aragón nodded. 'Be sure and camp inland from the banks of the river or you might become food for a hungry crocodile.'

'Feeding a croc wasn't exactly what I had in mind,' Pitt said, with a broad smile.

DEPARTING LATE in the afternoon, they cruised through the rapids above El Castillo without mishap until they were out of sight of the town. Between bends in the river, seeing no other *pangas*, they drove *Greek Angel* onto the bank, raised the outboard motor and pulled the boat into the underbrush to hide it from all water traffic.

While it was still light, they found a narrow path that headed towards the town. They ate their sandwiches, relaxed and slept till after midnight. Then, moving cautiously and using their night-vision scope to penetrate the darkness, they made their way to the fortress of El Castillo and studied the security, spotting and marking the cameras in their minds.

'I guess you know,' said Giordino, 'that breaking and entering are not in our line of work.'

Pitt was peering through the night-scope at the fence. 'Not only that, but NUMA doesn't give us hazard pay.'

'We had better call the admiral and give him an update. Once we go underground, the phone will be useless.'

Pitt took the satellite phone from his knapsack and began dialling a number. 'Sandecker is an early riser, so he hits the sack early. But Rudi should be there, since we're only an hour behind Washington.'

Five minutes later, Pitt closed the connection. 'Rudi will have a helicopter standing by at San Carlos if we have to make a hasty exit.'

Giordino returned his attention to the fortress. 'I don't see any stairways, only ramps.'

'Stone slopes were more efficient for hauling cannons up and down from the ramparts,' said Pitt.

'See anything that resembles an air vent to a tunnel?'

'It must come up through the centre.'

'So how do we get over the fence? It must be ten feet high.'

Pitt pulled a coil of rope from his knapsack. 'Can you still climb a tree or does your arthritis limit any physical activity?'

'My ageing joints aren't half as stiff as yours.'

Pitt slapped his old friend on the shoulder. 'Then let's see if two old fogeys can still perform daring feats of agility.'

Standing within several feet of the fence round the fortress was a jatoba tree, which towered more than 100 feet high. Its lower branches stretched far over the fence top, which was circled with razor-sharp spirals of barbed steel.

When ready, Giordino, followed by Pitt, climbed into the tree. Throwing a looped rope round a thick branch ten feet above, Giordino climbed up to it before crawling through smaller branches until he was beyond the fence and twelve feet above the ground. He paused and swept the area below with the night-scope.

When Pitt was level with Giordino's booted feet he whispered, 'Any sign of the guards and their dogs?'

'The guards are lazy,' Giordino replied. 'They loosed the dogs to run by themselves.'

'A wonder they haven't scented us by now.'

'You spoke too soon. I see three of them staring in our direction. Uh-oh, here they come on the run.'

Before the dogs began barking, Pitt reached into the knapsack on his back, grabbed the steaks from the restaurant and threw them onto

a ramp leading to the nearest bastion. They landed with a distinct plop sound that the dogs heard and homed in on.

'Are you sure this will work?' Giordino murmured.

'It always does in the movies.'

Pitt dropped down off the tree limb to the ground and stayed on his feet. Giordino followed, casting a wary eye on the dogs, who chewed the raw meat in happy delirium without paying the least attention to the two intruders.

'I may never doubt you again,' Giordino said under his breath.

Pitt led the way towards one of the stone ramps, carefully avoiding the nearest camera. When he signalled with a whistle, Giordino ran under the camera's blind side and sprayed the lens with black paint. Moving on, they paused outside the darkened castle, listening for suspicious sounds. Muted voices could be heard over the ramparts inside the main courtyard, where the guards' barracks had been constructed.

Pitt motioned towards a central turret that rose above the rest of the fort. It was built like a pyramid with the upper half sliced off. 'If there is a vertical ventilator shaft, it has to come out there,' he said softly.

'The only logical place,' Giordino agreed. Then he cocked an ear. 'What's that whirring sound?'

Pitt paused, listening, his senses alert. Then he nodded in the darkness. 'It must be coming from the ventilator fans.'

Keeping in the shadows, they climbed a narrow ramp of stones that led to the turret and ended at a small access door. A rush of cool air came through it. Bending low against the draught, Pitt entered and found himself faced with a column of steel mesh that descended far below them. The noise of the fan blades beating the air below the shaft opening magnified and tore at their eardrums.

'Noisy devil,' yelled Giordino.

'Be a lot worse if it didn't have silencers installed.'

Giordino walked round the steel-mesh cage until he found a bolt holding part of it shut. 'Locked from the inside,' he observed. 'We'll need to cut through the mesh.'

Pitt produced a small pair of wire cutters from his knapsack.

Giordino took them and held them up to the light coming from below. 'They should do nicely. Now please stand back while the master creates an entrance.'

It looked easy, but wasn't. Twenty-five minutes later, when he finally cut a hole high and wide enough for them to crawl through, Giordino handed the cutters back to Pitt, pulled the mesh apart and peered into the square-cut shaft which seemed to vanish into a bottomless pit. It

was fifteen feet wide and a ladder was attached to a circular metal tube that filled one corner.

'The access shaft,' Pitt volunteered loudly over the fan noise. 'For maintenance, in case the ventilator system needs repair. It also serves as an emergency exit for the mine workers.'

Giordino put his feet onto the rungs of the ladder. 'I hope I won't regret this!' he shouted as he began his descent.

Pitt was thankful the shaft was lit. After descending fifty feet, he paused and looked below. All he could see was the ladder stretching into infinity.

After what seemed half a lifetime, and what Giordino estimated was a drop of 500 feet, they stopped their descent. Giordino waved a hand to Pitt—the bottom of the ladder was in view. Slowly, cautiously, he turned until he was upside-down. Then he crawled downwards until he could see under the roof of what was presumably a control centre that monitored the gases, temperature and fan systems.

As Giordino turned until he was on his feet again, Pitt slid down the ladder beside him. 'What's the status?' he asked softly.

'The ladder runs through a control centre about fifteen feet above the floor of the tunnel. A man and a woman are sitting at computer consoles. Luckily, they have their backs to the ladder. We should be able to take them out before they know what hit them.'

They dropped silently down the ladder into the control booth. The system operators were intent on monitoring their computers and did not see the reflection of their assailants in their screens until it was too late. Giordino slugged the man with a right hook to the jaw. Pitt struck the back of the woman's neck.

Pitt pulled a roll of duct tape from his knapsack and tossed it to Giordino. 'Bind them up while I remove their coveralls.'

In less than three minutes the unconscious operators were bound and gagged in their underwear and rolled under counters out of sight from anyone passing by. Pitt slipped on the man's coveralls, which were a loose fit, while Giordino burst the seams of the coveralls that came off the woman. They found matching hard hats on a shelf and put them on. Pitt casually carried his knapsack over one shoulder, while Giordino looked official with a clipboard and pencil. One after the other, they dropped down the ladder to the tunnel floor.

They stared spellbound at their surroundings, their eyes narrowing under the glare of an unending array of lights.

This was no ordinary railroad tunnel. Pitt felt as though he was standing in a Jules Verne fantasy. He estimated the tunnel to be fifty

feet in diameter—far wider than any other ever constructed.

A buzzing sound echoed above them, coming from a huge conveyor belt mounted on steel beams which carried crushed rocks continuously towards the eastern end of the tunnel.

'There's the source of your brown crud,' said Pitt. 'They grind down the rock until it has the consistency of silt so it can be pumped through a pipe into the Caribbean.'

A railroad track and a parallel concrete roadway ran beneath the conveyor belt. Pitt knelt and studied the rails. 'Electric-powered, like the subways of New York. They must have generator substations every few miles to provide power. But standard railroad gauge is four feet, eight and a half inches between rails. These measure about three feet, which makes it a narrow-gauge railroad.'

'Laid as equipment support and supply transport for a tunnel-boring machine?' Giordino speculated. 'Maybe they intend to replace the tracks later.'

Pitt shook his head pensively. 'A tunnel this size wasn't built for train traffic. It must serve another purpose.'

They turned at the approach of a large, lavender-coloured double-decker bus with the Odyssey name and horse logo on the side. The workers sitting inside were wearing jumpsuits, hard hats and sunglasses. The driver slowed, not sure if they wanted a ride, but Pitt waved him on.

'Electric-powered,' said Giordino.

'Eliminates carbon monoxide exhaust pollution.'

Giordino walked over to a pair of empty battery-powered golf carts. 'Nice of them to provide us with transportation.' He climbed behind the wheel. 'Which way?'

Pitt thought a moment. 'Let's follow the excavated muck on the conveyor belt. This may well be our only chance to confirm if that's the source of the brown crud.'

The tunnel seemed to go on for ever. The golf cart's panel held a speedometer, and Pitt clocked the speed of the conveyor belt. It was travelling at the rapid clip of twelve miles an hour.

Pitt turned his attention to the upper works of the tunnel. After the boring machine had passed, the miners had installed rock-bolt support systems and lined the tunnel with concrete. The overhead lights illuminated the tunnel so brilliantly that both men understood why the workers in the bus had worn sunglasses. They put on their own.

An electric locomotive pulling several flat-bed cars carrying open crates of rock bolts passed, heading in the opposite direction, towards

the ongoing excavation. The train crew all waved at the two men in the golf cart, who responded by waving back.

'Everyone is real friendly in these parts,' remarked Giordino.

Every 1,000 yards they passed smaller, cross-cut tunnels leading off to their left that aroused their curiosity. They seemed to provide a link to another parallel tunnel. Pitt assumed it was a service tunnel for electrical conduits.

Giordino was stunned at the power of the golf cart. He got it up to fifty miles an hour and soon began overtaking other vehicles.

'Better slow down,' cautioned Pitt.

'You think they got traffic cops down here?'

'No, but big brother is watching,' Pitt countered, discreetly nodding at a camera mounted above on the overhead lighting system.

Giordino slowed and settled behind a bus travelling in the same direction. Pitt glanced at his watch. It was only a question of time before the technicians on the replacement shift entered the ventilator control room and discovered their co-workers bound with duct tape.

'We're coming up on something,' Giordino alerted Pitt.

A thumping sound became stronger as they moved closer to what Pitt quickly identified as a giant pumping station. The crushed rock was sent from the conveyor belt into a huge bin. From there, monumental pumps thrust it into pipes. As Pitt had concluded, the muck was then propelled into the sea. Beyond the pumping stations were giant steel doors.

'I wonder what's on the other side of those doors,' said Giordino.

'The Caribbean,' answered Pitt. 'We must be beneath its surface.'

'How could an operation this size be kept secret?'

'By paying the miners and engineers big bucks to keep their mouths shut, or perhaps by threats and blackmail.'

Pitt reached into his knapsack, lifted out a small digital camera and began taking pictures of the giant pumping operation.

'I don't suppose your magical kit can produce any food and drink?' probed Giordino.

Pitt reached inside and produced a pair of granola bars. 'That's the best I can do. We've seen what we came for, anyway. Time to go home.'

'The sooner we're out of here, the better,' said Giordino, pressing his foot on the accelerator. 'We're on borrowed time as it is.'

Pitt continued snapping pictures as they drove. 'One more detour, I want to see what's inside those cross-cut tunnels.'

Giordino swung right into the first cross-cut he reached without slowing down, taking the turn on two wheels. Pitt hung on and gave

him a waspish look but said nothing. They had travelled less than 200 feet when abruptly the golf cart shot out into another huge tunnel. They came to a stop and stared in astonishment.

'Mind-boggling,' Giordino muttered under his breath in awe.

'Don't stop,' ordered Pitt. 'Keep going.'

Giordino acquiesced and drove the golf cart at top speed through another cross-cut into another tunnel. He didn't wait for Pitt to urge him forwards. His foot never came off the pedal as they charged through another cross-cut into a fourth tunnel. At last they could go no farther, and Giordino braked the cart. They sat there for several moments, staring left and right in stunned disbelief. The tunnel network was of gargantuan proportions, with not one but four immense, interconnected tunnels of equal size.

'This can't be real,' Giordino whispered. 'How many railroads does Spectre intend to operate?'

Pitt focused his concentration. 'There has to be another objective behind such an expensive undertaking. Besides,' he added, looking down at the floor of the tunnel, 'here they removed the railroad tracks.'

Giordino nodded discreetly at a security camera that was aimed directly at them. 'We'd better head back to the main tunnel and find other transportation. This cart is too conspicuous.'

'Good thinking,' said Pitt. 'If they haven't figured out that they have unwelcome intruders by now, they must be brain dead.'

They retraced their journey, stopping just short of the tunnel they had started from. They parked the golf cart in the cross-cut tunnel then nonchalantly walked along the road in the main tunnel until they reached a stop where eight miners were waiting for a bus.

No sooner had the double-decker arrived than a fleet of carts with red and yellow lights flashing sped past and into the cross-cut tunnel they'd just deserted.

'Once they find the cart, it will take them all of ten seconds to know we're on this bus,' said Giordino.

Pitt's eyes were on a freight train that was approaching from the east. 'My thoughts exactly.' He held up a hand and motioned for the bus driver to continue after the waiting miners had boarded. The door closed with a hiss and the bus moved on.

'When was the last time you chased a freight train?' Pitt asked as they hurried across the road.

'Several years ago in the Sahara.'

'As I recall, you fell off.'

'I hate it when you make sport of me.'

Pitt clocked the train's speed at twenty miles an hour. The instant the locomotive had passed by, they sprinted along the track after the last flat-bed car. As if he was carrying a football towards the end zone, Giordino charged, grabbed the hand ladder as it passed, held on and was swept onto the car. Pitt also used the momentum of the train to swing himself aboard.

The flat-bed car was loaded with two electric-powered pick-up trucks. They looked to be shiny and new. Pitt and Giordino threw open the door to one of the trucks and slipped into the cab, crouching down below the windows. Their timing couldn't have been more perfect, as two security patrol cars came screaming past, lights flashing as they raced after the bus.

Pitt looked pleased. 'Our little manoeuvre was missed by the cameras or they'd have come after us instead of the bus.'

'About time we had some luck.'

'Stay put,' instructed Pitt. 'I'll be right back.'

He opened the door on the side of the truck farthest from the road and lowered himself to his hands and knees. Crawling from front to back, he removed the chocks and tie-down chains that held the pick-up truck to the rail car. Then he scrambled back inside.

Giordino looked at him strangely. 'I can read your mind, and I can't see how we're going to drive off a moving train or get out of a tunnel that's blocked on both ends.'

'We'll worry about that when the time comes.'

THERE IS NOTHING on earth that remotely resembles a big tunnel-boring machine.

The TBM that had dug the tunnels under Nicaragua stretched over 120 yards in length, followed by another 100 yards of equipment train. An incredibly complicated monster that looked like the first stage of a saturn rocket, it fractured flakes of bedrock by the continuous rotation of a series of carbide cutters mounted on a massive circular steel cutter head.

The body that enclosed the fifty-two-foot-wide cutter head also contained the drive motors that provided the enormous power it took to thrust the cutter's teeth into the rock, and the hydraulic presses that exerted immense pressure to force the TBM against the rock.

The operator, who was positioned at the front of the machine, could automatically steer it while he monitored the operation. The excavated muck was transported to the rear section of the TBM and passed through a rock crusher, then onto the conveyor belt.

The freight train had stopped two hundred yards behind the TBM to unload at a supply depot where a series of large freight elevators ascended through the roof of the tunnel. No one seemed to pay any attention as Pitt drove the truck from the flat-bed onto the loading dock and down a ramp to the concrete road. Then he pulled over behind a row of three other electric trucks.

Giordino looked around the busy area, where at least thirty miners were operating the mass of machinery.

'That was too easy.'

'We're not home yet,' said Pitt. 'We can't escape from this tunnel, because it isn't complete yet. Our only hope is to sneak out the Pacific side from one of the other three tunnels' ventilators.'

Giordino pointed down the loading dock, where security guards were checking the ID passes of the miners. 'Time to shove off. We don't exactly fit our descriptions.'

Pitt cracked open the door of the truck and looked the other way along the loading dock. It was deserted. 'Out this way,' he said.

Giordino followed him, sliding across the front seat of the pick-up. They hit the loading dock crouched and running before cutting through a warehouse and back along the railroad track. They paused behind a row of portable toilets and took stock.

'It'd help if we had transportation,' said Giordino.

'Wishing will make it so,' Pitt said with a big grin. Without waiting for Giordino, he stood up and casually approached one of the security guard's vehicles that was parked unattended.

He settled behind the wheel, turned the ignition and pressed his foot on the accelerator as Giordino leapt through the opposite door. The car silently moved away.

The security guards were so busy examining the miners' IDs that they did not notice their patrol car being stolen, and the noise of the TBM made it impossible for them to hear the workers who were trying to call their attention to the theft.

As soon as they came to the first cross-cut tunnel, Pitt hung a hard right and repeated the manoeuvre, swinging into the parallel tunnel and heading towards its western portal. He assumed that the four tunnels had been excavated under Lake Nicaragua to come up beyond the narrow stretch of land separating the lake from the ocean at the old port of San Juan del Sur. Ventilators would surely have to be placed here before the tunnels continued out from shore.

After driving for what seemed like hours, they came to a massive set of pumps like the ones they had encountered at the eastern end

of the tunnel network. Then the tunnel abruptly ended at another pair of gigantic doors. The trickle of water that seeped around their edges and down the tunnel proved that Pitt and Giordino were not surfacing near San Juan del Sur, but had come to a dead end, deep under water.

eight

When Admiral Sandecker arrived at NUMA headquarters, Rudi Gunn was waiting for him, a grim expression on his face. He stared over his horn-rimmed glasses as Sandecker sat down at his desk.

'What's the latest word from Pitt and Giordino?'

'Nothing in the last eight hours.' Gunn was uneasy. 'Not since they entered what they described as a ventilator shaft leading to a deep underground tunnel which Pitt reckoned ran under Nicaragua from the Pacific to the Caribbean. He also reported that the builder was the Odyssey conglomeration.'

'Odyssey again? They seem to crop up everywhere,' Sandecker said.

Gunn laid a file on the desk. 'Hiram Yaeger obtained a report on Odyssey's programmes and operations. The company's wholly owned by Spectre.'

'Could he have funded such a project on his own?'

'As far as we can tell, he has the resources. But Yaeger believes that on a project of this magnitude, he was likely to have been funded by the People's Republic of China, which has bankrolled his Central American developments in the past.'

'But why all the secrecy?' muttered Sandecker.

Gunn shrugged. 'We're in the dark on that score. Shall we contact Central Intelligence and the Pentagon about our suspicions?'

Sandecker looked pensive for a moment. Then he said, 'No, we'll go direct to the President's National Security Advisor.'

'WE HAVE NO PLACE to go,' said Pitt calmly. 'All Spectre's security people have to do is wait until we get hungry and thirsty, then welcome us back into the main tunnel when we give ourselves up in hope of a last meal before we're hung.'

'They would probably prefer to let us rot in here.'

'There is that.' Pitt wiped a sleeve across his forehead to blot the

sweat that had suddenly begun streaming into his eyes. 'Have you noticed the temperature in this tunnel is much higher than the others?'

'It's beginning to feel like a steam bath,' said Giordino, his face glistening. 'Speaking of hunger, how's your supply of granola bars?'

'Fresh out.'

Abruptly, the thought crossed their minds at the same time, and they turned to each other and uttered in unison, 'Ventilator shaft.'

Giordino suddenly became serious. 'Maybe not. I didn't see any raised control booths in the outer tunnels.'

'Perhaps they were removed along with the railroad tracks and the overhead lighting, since they were no longer required.'

'We'll know soon enough,' said Giordino as he turned the car round, and headed back in the direction they'd come.

The car's headlights probed the darkness ahead. After a couple of miles, Giordino spotted the rungs of a ladder crawling up one wall. He parked about thirty feet away so the headlights would illuminate a wider area of the tunnel wall. 'The rungs go up to where a ventilator shaft control booth once hung,' he said.

Pitt stepped from the car and began climbing. The rungs were damp and flaked with rust. He reached the top and found a round iron cover sealing the entrance to the ventilator shaft above. There was a sliding bolt holding it against bottom stops.

He pulled the bolt and it slid out of its clamp with little resistance. Then Pitt leaned until his shoulder was pressed against the cover, and heaved. It moved a millimetre at most.

'It's going to take the two of us,' he called down.

Giordino came up the ladder until he was standing one rung up from Pitt to compensate for the difference in their heights. With two shoulders against the heavy iron cover, they both put their strength into the effort. For an instant, the cover resisted. Then with a loud screech it swung open and clanged against one wall of the shaft.

'I wonder where it comes out,' murmured Giordino, staring up into the ominous black cavity.

'I have no idea, but we're going to find out.'

Giordino gave Pitt's arm a light squeeze. 'Hold on. In case Spectre's goons come looking for us . . .' He dropped down the ladder and climbed into the car, then removed the belt of his coveralls and tied the steering wheel so the front tyres were positioned straight ahead. Then he pulled the front seat out of the car and stood it on end, using it to press the accelerator against the floor. Finally, he turned on the ignition and stepped back.

The car shot down the tunnel, its headlights carving weird patterns through the darkness. Within a hundred yards, it yawed against one wall of the tunnel, then careened against the other side in its wild ride, bouncing back and forth far into the distance with a screech of tortured metal.

'I wonder how Spectre will explain that to his insurance adjuster,' said Giordino. He turned, but Pitt was already scaling the ladder.

As he climbed slowly in the pitch blackness, he counted the rungs and paused after each fifty to catch his breath. They were spaced twelve inches apart, so it was simple to calculate the distance they had climbed. Climbing down the shaft into the control booth from El Castillo seemed like a swim in the bathtub in comparison. At rung 350, Pitt stopped and waited for Giordino to catch up.

'Does this never end?' Giordino gasped.

'Pardon the pun,' Pitt muttered between heavy breaths, 'but there is light at the end of the tunnel.'

Giordino glanced up and saw a tiny glow in the distance. It looked ten miles away to him. 'Is there any way it could come to us?'

'Just hope it doesn't move farther away.'

As they continued, the glow above grew with agonising slowness. Water dripped down the walls and onto the rungs and their hands soon became red and raw, the skin scoured as if by sandpaper.

At long last, the glow became a bright light. The end was only a few short feet away now.

Pitt came to the steel mesh that covered the top of the shaft, hanging there with breaths coming in great heaves, blood trickling from his palms and fingers. 'Made it,' he gasped.

Giordino soon joined him, panting.

As soon as the numbness and aches subsided, Pitt reached into his knapsack, retrieved the wire cutters and wearily began snipping at the steel mesh. 'We'll take turns.'

It took the two of them almost an hour to cut an opening large enough to crawl through. Once past the mesh, Pitt's eyes were blinded by the sunlight streaming all around him. Putting on his sunglasses, he found himself in a round room with floor-to-ceiling glass walls.

While Giordino squirmed through the opening, Pitt walked around the glass-enclosed room and gazed down at a spectacular 360-degree view of a huge lake.

'Where did we come up?' asked Giordino.

Pitt turned and looked at him with a bemused expression. 'You're not going to believe this, but we're at the top of a lighthouse.'

'A LIGHTHOUSE!' burst Sandecker over his speakerphone. His voice betrayed his elation at hearing that Pitt and Giordino were safe.

'Yes, sir,' Pitt's voice came back over his satellite phone. 'Spectre built it to hide a ventilator shaft rising from the tunnel.'

Sandecker reached for one of his cigars.

'Your story sounds fantastic.'

'Four tunnels, each a hundred and fifty miles in length, excavated in four years,' said Pitt.

'If not for railroads,' said Gunn, leaning over the speakerphone, 'for what purpose?'

'Al and I can't even make a good guess. The pumps on each end of the tunnels suggest they'll be used to drive water through them, but that doesn't make a lot of sense.'

'I've taped your brief report,' acknowledged Sandecker, 'and will give it to Yaeger to be getting on with until you can make a more comprehensive report.'

'I've plotted your location,' said Gunn. 'I'll charter a helicopter. They should be in the air and over your lighthouse in another two hours.'

'Al and I can't wait to clean up and eat a decent meal.'

'No time for luxuries,' snapped Sandecker. 'The copter will take you direct to the airport in Managua, where a NUMA jet will be waiting. You can wash and eat after you arrive here.'

'You're a hard man, Admiral.'

'Learn from it,' Sandecker said, with a canny grin. 'You might be sitting in my chair someday.'

SANDECKER AND GUNN arranged for a helicopter to pick up Pitt and Giordino at the lighthouse, then they left the admiral's office and dropped down a floor to the conference room, where Sandecker had arranged a meeting to discuss the Celtic discoveries on Navidad Bank.

Sitting round a huge oval table were Hiram Yaeger and Dirk and Summer Pitt. Squeezing his massive bulk into a chair beside Dirk was St Julien Perlmutter, a massive man with shaggy grey hair, a full beard and long moustache. His personal library was renowned as the greatest repository of marine history in the world. Next to Summer was historian Dr John Wesley Chisholm, professor of ancient history at the University of Pennsylvania.

Everyone was paying rapt attention to Dr Elsworth Boyd, who was standing in front of a large monitor displaying a montage of photos and lecturing on the artefacts and images of the stone carvings recovered and recorded at Navidad Bank.

Boyd, a sinewy man in his early forties, gazed at his audience through pigeon-grey eyes, occasionally brushing back a forelock of auburn hair. A professor of ancient history at Trinity College, Dublin, he had published numerous books on the Celts. When invited by Admiral Sandecker to fly to Washington and study the artefacts first-hand, he was on the next plane. He had at first suspected that what he was seeing might be part of an elaborate hoax, but after hours of examining the artefacts, was convinced of their authenticity.

'Unlike the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans,' explained Boyd, 'the Celts have been sidelined by historians, despite the fact that they were a keystone of Western civilisation. Much of our heritage—religious, political, social and literary—was born within Celtic society. Industry, too, since they were the first to produce bronze and then iron.'

'So why aren't we more aware of Celtic influence?' asked Sandecker.

Boyd laughed. 'There lies the rub. Three thousand years ago, the Celts transmitted all their knowledge and customs orally through succeeding generations. Not until the eighth century BC did they begin to write anything down. Much later, when the Romans swept over Europe, they considered the Celts little more than uncouth barbarians. And yet the Celts were advanced in more ways than the early Greeks, and their culture and civilisation predates the Greeks by several hundred years. They lacked only a written language and elaborate architecture.

'Unlike the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, they never had national unity. They were made up of a loose confederation of tribes that often fought each other but came together to fight a common enemy. After fifteen hundred years, their village culture eventually gave way to hill-forts constructed of earthworks and wooden palisades that evolved into bigger communities. Quite a number of modern cities are built on the sites of old Celtic fortresses: Zurich, Paris, Munich and Copenhagen, for example.'

'How widespread were their settlements?' asked Dirk.

'After originating around the Caspian Sea, the Celts fanned out from Eastern Europe and moved into the north of Italy and Switzerland, then on to France, Germany and Britain, reaching as far north as Denmark and as far south as Spain and Greece.'

Yaeger leaned forward in his chair. 'Does your dating of the artefacts agree with my computer calculations?'

'In the ballpark, I'd say,' Boyd replied. He held a remote and flashed an image of the underwater structure on a monitor covering one wall of the conference room. 'What is interesting is that the structure was

the dwelling, and also the tomb, of a very important woman, comparable to a tribal queen or high priestess. The bronze body armour is especially revealing. The only other armour known to have come from a woman is dated between the eighth and eleventh centuries BC.'

'When you say "priestess",' said Summer, 'you mean as in druid?'

'A druidess,' Boyd answered, nodding. 'She probably held a high position in the sacred world of Celtic druidism. I also found this interesting.' Boyd pulled up an enhanced photo of the foot of the stone funeral bed, where a faint carving was now visible. 'Here you see the stylised image of a galloping horse. An image almost identical to this was carved into a chalk hillside in Oxfordshire, England, in the first century AD. Called the White Horse of Uffington, it represents the Celtic horse-goddess, Epona, thought to have been a goddess of beauty and fertility.'

'What brought down the druids?' asked Dirk.

'As Christianity took hold throughout Europe, the heads of the Church could not allow any opposition to masculine authority. Druidesses were reduced to the category of witches. The Romans, particularly, made a crusade of stamping out the druid religion. They saw it as a source of rebellion against Rome. They were also disgusted by the druid practice of human sacrifice. Sacrificial blood rites were not uncommon.'

'Which brings us back to the question we've asked ourselves a hundred times,' said Dirk. 'How did a high-ranking Celtic druidess come to be entombed on what was once an island in the Caribbean, five thousand miles from her homeland in Europe?'

Boyd turned and nodded at Chisholm, who stood up. 'I believe my colleague may have some answers.'

'I can't tell you how she got there,' said Chisholm, taking the remote from Boyd, 'but I might shed some light on who she was.' He pressed a button on the remote and the first image of the stone carvings found by Dirk and Summer appeared on the monitor.

'The first scene shows a fleet of ships unloading fighting men, horses and chariots.' He pressed another button on the remote. 'Scene two, the opposing army is seen rising from a huge ditch surrounding a citadel on a steep hill. The next panel has them charging across a flat plain and attacking the enemy before they can unload their ships. Scene four is the battle to repel the fleet.'

'If it wasn't for all the earthworks,' said Perlmutter, 'I'd say we're looking at the Trojan War.'

Chisholm grinned. 'You *are* looking at the Trojan War.'

Sandecker fell into the trap. 'Strange-looking Greeks and Trojans. I always thought they grew beards, not bushy moustaches.'

'That's because the figures in the carvings are not Greeks or Trojans.'

'Who then?'

'Celts.'

Perlmutter nodded. 'I've read Iman Wilkens.'

'Then you know his remarkable revelation about the greatest misconception of ancient history—that the battle for Troy did not take place on the west coast of Turkey?'

Yaeger stared at him, looking puzzled. 'If not Turkey, then where?'

'England,' Chisholm answered. 'On the North Sea.'

Everyone except Perlmutter gave Chisholm a look of disbelief.

'It's still a hotly debated subject,' said Boyd. 'Over a century ago, Heinrich Schliemann declared emphatically that he had found Troy using Homer's *Iliad* as his guide. He claimed that Hisarlik was the location. But there is no proof that even Homer himself actually existed. Legend tells us that a man called Homer took epic poems of a great war that had been passed down orally for hundreds of years, and recorded them in a series of adventure tales in what became the world's earliest written literature—but was he actually one man or a group? The truth will never be known. And was the Trojan War fable or fact? And if it occurred in the early Bronze Age, were the Greeks the true enemies of the Trojans, *or* did Homer write about an event that took place more than a thousand miles away?'

Perlmutter grinned broadly. 'What no one considered until Wilkens was that, instead of being Greek, Homer might have been a Celtic poet who wrote about a battle that occurred four hundred years earlier, not in the Mediterranean but in the North Sea.'

Gunn looked adrift. 'Then the epic voyage of Odysseus . . .'

'Took place in the Atlantic Ocean,' Perlmutter put in.

Summer's mind was spinning. 'Are you implying that Helen's face didn't launch a thousand ships?'

'What I was about to suggest,' Boyd countered with a tired smile, 'is that the truth behind the myth was not about a conflict fought because of a king's rage for revenge over the abduction of his wife by her lover. Nor was it a quest for the treasures of Troy. The conflict was fought over a soft, crystalline, metallic element called tin.'

Chisholm nodded in agreement. 'When bronze came along in around 2000 BC, copper was abundant throughout Europe and the Middle East—but tin ore is rare, so prospectors spread throughout the ancient world in search of it. They eventually found the largest

deposits in southwest England. The British Celtic tribes built an international marketplace for dealing in tin that they mined, smelted and traded. They quickly developed a monopoly and commanded high prices. The Celts of Central Europe, however, had only handmade objects and amber to trade. Without a bronze industry, they had little hope of going beyond an agricultural society.'

'So they decided to band together and seize the tin mines from the Brits?' Yaeger anticipated.

'Precisely,' Boyd replied. 'The Celtic tribes on the continent formed an alliance to invade England and seize the mines in a territory then known as the Troad, or later Troy. The capital city was called Ilium.'

'So the Achaeans were not Greeks,' said Yaeger.

Boyd gave a slight nod of his head. 'Achaean was a loose term for allies. The Trojans generally referred to themselves as Dardanians.'

'What evidence does Wilkens give for his theory?' asked Sandecker.

'May I jump in?' asked Perlmutter. 'I've studied Wilkens's book, *Where Troy Once Stood*.'

'Be our guest,' Boyd acquiesced.

'For one thing,' Perlmutter began, 'nowhere does Homer call the invading fleet "Greeks". During 1100 BC, when the war supposedly took place, Greece was sparsely populated. There were no major cities that could support a large fleet of fighting ships. The early Greeks were not considered seafaring people.'

'And there is the vegetation,' Boyd prompted.

'To be sure,' Perlmutter said. 'Most of the trees Homer details are deciduous—better suited to the damper atmosphere of Europe than the arid land of Greece and Turkey. And then we have the horses in the story. The Celts were a horse-loving people and they and the Egyptians used chariots as fighting platforms, but not the Greeks or Romans. They preferred to fight on foot.'

'Intriguing hypothesis,' said an unconvinced Sandecker. 'But conjecture just the same.'

'I was coming to the best part.' Perlmutter showed his teeth in a wide smile. 'The geography and the topography in the *Iliad* simply do not match the existing land and seascapes around the Mediterranean. Wilkens discovered that Homer's names for towns, regions and rivers have their sources in continental Europe and England.'

'The list goes on,' said Chisholm. 'Homer describes Menelaus with red hair, Odysseus with reddish brown and Achilles as blond. Also, some warriors were depicted with fair skin. These are characteristics of Celts, not Mediterranean people.'

'The invading Achaean tribes came from the bronze-making regions of Europe,' continued Perlmutter. 'Their fleet probably sailed across the Sea of Helle, now known as the North Sea. They landed in a large bay once called the Thracian Sea, which is labelled on present-day maps simply as The Wash.'

'And the Trojans?' queried Sandecker, still not totally convinced.

'Their army came from all over England, Scotland and Wales, and they were aided by allies from Brittany and Belgium.'

'Then where was the citadel of Troy?' Sandecker persisted.

Perlmutter took up the challenge. 'The best bet goes to the Gog Magog Hills, where large earthworks—round fortifications with deep defensive ditches—have been discovered and excavated, revealing evidence of wooden palisades and many bronze artefacts. Funeral urns and vast numbers of skeletons that showed signs of mutilation have also been uncovered.'

Sandecker looked from Boyd to Chisholm. 'All right, now that we've heard how the Trojan War was fought in England over tin mines, what has it got to do with the Celtic discoveries by Dirk and Summer on Navidad Bank?'

The two scholars exchanged amused looks. Then Boyd said, 'Why, everything, Admiral. Now that we're reasonably sure the true battle site of the Trojan War was in England, we can begin to tie Odysseus's great voyage of adventure to Navidad Bank.'

'What are you saying?' asked Gunn.

Sandecker turned slowly to Perlmutter. 'St Julien, do you go along with this craziness?'

'Not crazy at all,' said Perlmutter, with a broad grin. 'It was written in Homer's epics that Odysseus was king of the island of Ithaca. But the Greek island never had a kingdom, nor does it have any significant ruins. Wilkens has identified most of Odysseus's ports of call, and none of them are in the Mediterranean.'

'I have to agree,' said Yaeger. 'Based on all the known information on Odysseus's voyage, Homer's descriptions, Wilkens's theories, Bronze Age navigation methods, tides and currents, Max and I have arrived at a list of his ports of call.' Yaeger picked up the remote and pressed in a numbered code. A chart of the North Atlantic filled the screen, traversed by a red line. Yaeger used a laser beam as a pointer and began to trace Odysseus's journey from England.

'Odysseus's first landfall after being swept out to sea was what he described as the Land of the Lotus Eaters. According to Wilkens, this was probably the west coast of Africa, at Senegal. From there, the

winds took him west to the Cape Verde Islands, which is the logical choice for the Island of the Cyclops. I put his next landfall on one of the many islands south of Martinique and north of Trinidad. From there, he and his fleet were driven by a storm to the Land of the Laestrygonians—one of the small islands off Guadeloupe fits the bill. The high cliffs on each side of the narrow channel that he described his ship entering matches the island geography to a T.'

'This is where the Laestrygonian giants destroyed Odysseus's fleet,' added Perlmutter, 'by hurling huge rocks at them from the cliffs.'

'If that were true,' said Yaeger, 'the ships loaded with treasure would still lie in the silt of the harbour.'

'What is the name of the island?' asked Summer.

'Branwen,' responded Yaeger. 'She was a Celtic goddess.'

'What country owns the island?' asked Dirk.

'It's privately owned.'

'Do you know by whom?' asked Summer.

Yaeger checked his notes. 'A wealthy woman named Epona Eliade.'

'Epona is also the name of a Celtic goddess,' said Summer. 'Now there's a coincidence.'

'I'll check it out,' said Yaeger. 'Now, with only one ship out of twelve, he sailed to the island of Circe, called Aeaea, which computes as Navidad Bank, a spot Homer placed on the edge of the world. The best guess for Hades,' he went on, 'is the Santo Tomás caverns on Cuba. But no geographical location this side of the Atlantic works for the Sirens, or Scylla and Charybdis.' He paused a moment before picking up Odysseus's journey on the chart again. 'Next, Odysseus sails eastwards until he reaches Calypso's island of Ogygia, which Wilkens and I agree is São Miguel in the Azores.'

'Calypso was the beautiful sister goddess of Circe,' said Summer. 'Didn't Odysseus spend a romantic interlude with her in a garden paradise after his affair with Circe on her island?'

'He did,' said Chisholm, 'but neither lady was a goddess. They were described as incredibly beautiful women with magical personalities. Chances are they were druidesses.'

'After Odysseus leaves a tearful Calypso on the shore,' Yaeger continued, 'his final stop, after a detour due to adverse winds, is the palace of King Alcinous, which works out to be Lanzarote in the Canaries. After relating his adventures to the king and his family, he is given a ship and finally makes his way home to Ithaca.'

'Where do you put Ithaca?' enquired Gunn.

'The port of Cadiz in southwestern Spain.'

Silence fell around the table as everyone assimilated the classic tale and the multitude of theories. How much was remotely close to the truth? Only Homer knew, and he hadn't spoken for 3,000 years.

AFTER THE OTHERS had left, Sandecker called Dirk and Summer into his office. As soon as they were all seated, he came to the point.

'I'd like you two to conduct an archaeology project. I want you to fly to Guadeloupe and survey the harbour on the island of Branwen.'

'It's privately owned—won't we need permission?' asked Summer.

'As long as you don't step ashore, you won't be trespassing. If you were to find the ships of Odysseus's fleet they would be by far the oldest ever shipwrecks found in the Western Hemisphere. If it can be done, I want it done by NUMA.'

Summer folded her hands nervously. 'You must realise, Admiral, the odds of making such a find are a million to one.'

'The chance is worth the effort. You'll leave tomorrow morning. After your plane lands at the airport near Pointe-à-Pitre in Guadeloupe, you'll be met by a NUMA representative by the name of Charles Moreau. He has chartered a boat for you to sail to Branwen Island. Any questions?'

Dirk took Summer's hand. 'What do you think?'

'Sounds exciting.'

'Somehow I knew you'd say that,' Dirk said wearily. 'What time do you want us at the NUMA terminal, Admiral?'

Sandecker grinned jovially. 'Better get an early start. Your plane will take off at six.'

FOLLOWING THE MEETING, Yaeger sat in his domain on the tenth floor, reading the report from Sandecker's office regarding Pitt and Giordino's discovery of huge underground tunnels crossing Nicaragua. He summoned Max, who materialised wearing a blue silk robe with a yellow sash, and an emblem across the back that read Wonder Woman. 'How do you like my threads?' she asked in a syrupy voice.

Yaeger smiled. 'If you're through showing off, Wonder Woman, I have a little job for you.' Yaeger programmed the report into Max's memory. 'Take your time and see what you make of this.'

Max stood unblinking for a few moments and then asked, 'What do you wish to know?'

'What possible motive does Odyssey have for digging four massive tunnels across Nicaragua from the Atlantic to the Pacific?'

Max patted her mouth in a yawn. 'That's easy. The conundrum doesn't even warm my circuits.'

'All right, I'm eager to hear your solution.'

'The tunnels were built to transfer a vast amount of water.'

'A series of tunnels leading into the oceans, and mounting huge pumps, makes that an obyious conclusion.'

'Ah,' Max said, 'but do you know *why* they want to pump massive amounts of water through the tunnels?'

'For a huge irrigation project? Hell, I don't know.'

'How can humans be so dense?' Max said in frustration. 'The tunnels were created to divert the South Equatorial Current into the Caribbean Sea.'

Yaeger was confused. 'And?' he probed.

Max threw up her hands. 'By diverting the South Equatorial Current, the temperature of the Gulf Stream, the water that warms Europe, would drop almost eight degrees by the time its flow reached the continent. It would create a weather pattern equal to northern Siberia's.'

The horrendous scheme suddenly became crystal clear to Yaeger. He picked up the phone and dialled Sandecker's office.

nine

The helicopter was over an hour late. While Giordino happily slipped into dreamland, Pitt peered through his binoculars over the waters of Lake Nicaragua that surrounded the lighthouse. On the shoreline to the west he could make out a small town. He checked his map and determined that it was Rivas. He then turned his attention to a large, majestic island to the west, shaped like a figure of eight, that looked to be quite fertile and thickly forested.

According to his map, it was called Isla de Ometepe. Pitt focused in on two volcanic mountains tied together by a narrow isthmus a couple of miles in length.

The volcano at the northern end of the island rose over 5,000 feet, and from the wisp of steam that issued through the crater, appeared to be active. The southern volcano sat dormant. Pitt estimated that the four underground tunnels ran directly under the isthmus of the island near the base of the northern volcano. That would explain, he

thought, the unusual rise in temperature that he and Giordino had experienced inside the tunnel.

A glance at the map revealed that the active volcano was named Concepción, while its mate was labelled Madera. He swung the binoculars round and unexpectedly found himself staring at what looked to be a vast industrial enterprise spreading over the southern slopes of Concepción just above the isthmus.

Then he observed an aircraft banking round the peak of the Madera volcano and landing on a runway that ran across the isthmus. It taxied to a large terminal.

The sun shone between a pair of clouds, bathing Isla de Ometepe in bright light. Though the aircraft seemed no larger than an ant through the glasses, there was no mistaking the lavender colour on the fuselage and wings.

'Odyssey,' he muttered to himself, his mind in turmoil. Only then did he realise that the industrial facility sat directly above the tunnels. That explained the freight elevators he had seen at the rail terminal. He also spotted four cargo-loading cranes against the blue sky above a row of warehouses. The warehouse roofs shielded what must have been an extensive dock, and he realised that the complex didn't require an outside transportation system—it was self-sufficient. Then three things happened almost simultaneously that alerted him to trouble.

The lighthouse began to tremble and sway like a hula dancer. Pitt immediately turned and gazed at the Concepción volcano, thinking that it might have erupted, but the peak appeared peaceful. He glanced down at the water and saw the surface ripple as if being shaken from below by some unseen giant. One minute later, the quake faded. It did not wake up Giordino.

The second danger was a small lavender patrol boat that was coming from the island and heading for the lighthouse. And the third and final danger came from below their feet. What probably saved their lives in the next few seconds was an almost scarcely heard sound: a slight clink of metal against metal coming from the shaft leading to the tunnel deep below.

Pitt kicked Giordino. 'We have callers.'

Giordino instantly woke and pulled his 50-calibre Desert Eagle automatic from under the jumpsuit, as Pitt retrieved the ancient Colt .45 from his knapsack.

Crouched beside the shaft, Pitt shouted down without looking over the edge. 'Stay where you are . . .!'

A hail of automatic fire burst from the shaft and peppered the metal

roof of the lighthouse with holes. Pitt crawled over to one of the lighthouse windows and pounded on the glass with the butt of the Colt. The panes were thick and it took several hammerlike blows to shatter them. Most of the shards fell to the sea below, but Pitt smashed the remaining fragments onto the floor and pushed them over the edge of the shaft. Shouts and cries of pain erupted from below, and the gunfire stopped.

Pitt and Giordino blindly fired their automatics down the shaft, their bullets ricocheting against the concrete walls and causing havoc among the Odyssey security guards climbing the ladder. Their cries of pain were replaced by the sickening thuds of bodies hurtling down the shaft.

'That should put a crimp in their plans,' said Giordino in a voice devoid of remorse, as he inserted a full clip.

'We still have unwanted guests to deal with,' said Pitt, pointing at the patrol boat speeding towards the lighthouse.

'It's going to be close.' Giordino nodded towards a blue Bell 430 helicopter that was skimming over the lake from the north.

Pitt allowed himself a tight grin. 'The bird is faster. It should arrive a good mile ahead of the boat.'

'Pray they don't mount rocket launchers.'

'We'll know shortly. Get ready to grab the harness when it's dropped.'

'Take too long for it to haul us up one at a time,' said Giordino. 'I strongly suggest we bid a tearful goodbye to the lighthouse together.'

Pitt nodded. 'I'm with you.'

They stepped out onto a narrow balcony that ran round the top of the lighthouse as the pilot made an approach and a crewman began lowering a harness out of the open side door. Taller by almost a foot than Giordino, Pitt leapt up and grabbed the harness as it swung in circles under the rotor wash. He looped it round Giordino's shoulders. 'You're built tougher than I am. You take the strain and I'll hold on to you.'

Giordino clutched the cable as Pitt gripped him tightly round the waist. The crewman, unable to be heard above the whine of the turbines, waved frantically, trying to signal that he could lift only one man at a time.

His warning came too late.

Pitt and Giordino were dragged off the balcony of the lighthouse and dangled 100 feet above the water as a gust of wind struck the helicopter, which suddenly tilted to starboard from the combined weight of both men. The pilot quickly corrected and hovered on an

even keel as his crewman watched the overloaded winch strain to pull both men aboard.

Pitt and Giordino's luck prevailed and the pursuing boat did not fire missiles. However, a pair of heavy calibre guns mounted on the bow began a staccato burst. Fortunately, the boat was still far away and the gunner's aim was wide.

The pilot, horrified at seeing himself shot at, forgot about the men he had come to rescue, threw the helicopter on its side and beat a hasty retreat towards the shore. With twenty feet to go, Pitt and Giordino were crazily swinging beneath the craft. Giordino felt as if his arms were coming out of their sockets. Pitt could see the agony on his partner's face, but could do little but clutch him in a death grip and shout at the crewman to speed up the lift.

Then he was looking into the eyes of the crewman only five feet away. The crewman turned and shouted to the pilot, who deftly banked the copter just enough for Pitt and Giordino to fall inside the cargo section. The side door was rapidly slammed closed and locked.

The still-shocked crewman stared at the two men sprawled on the floor. 'You *hombres* are *locos*,' he grunted with a heavy Spanish accent. 'Lift only for mail sacks weighing one hundred pounds.'

'Remind me to write a letter of recommendation to the company who manufactured the winch,' said Pitt. He came to his feet and hurried into the cockpit, where he stared out of a side window until he spotted the patrol boat. It was circling back to the island.

'What in hell was that all about?' demanded the pilot angrily. 'I didn't count on trouble when I took this charter, but those clowns were actually shooting at us.'

'We're lucky they're bad shots.'

'Why were they after you?'

'We saw something we shouldn't.'

'What's to see in an abandoned lighthouse?'

'It isn't what it seems.'

The pilot didn't pursue the issue. 'We'll be on the ground at our field in Managua in another twenty-five minutes.'

'The sooner the better.' Pitt motioned to the empty copilot's seat. 'Do you mind?'

'Not at all.'

'I don't suppose you could make a pass over the Odyssey facility on the island?'

'You're joking. I couldn't fly within five miles without a security aircraft chasing me away.'

'No one has ever sneaked through Odyssey security?' asked Pitt.

The pilot smiled tautly. 'Nobody who lived. Patrol boats circle it, assisted by helicopters. Remote sensors detect movement along every path and road leading to the complex. The locals call it "the house of the invisible one", because everybody who goes in is never seen again.'

'The local officials never investigate?' asked Pitt.

The pilot shook his head. 'The word is that Odyssey has bought off every politician, judge and police chief in the country.'

Pitt spent the rest of the trip in silence, his mind sifting through what he knew about Odyssey, its strange founder and even stranger operations. As soon as the pilot set the helicopter down at his company hangar two miles outside Managua, Pitt walked off by himself and called Admiral Sandecker.

Sandecker didn't mince his words. 'Haven't you taken off for Washington yet?'

'No,' Pitt replied smartly. 'And we're not going to.'

Sandecker knew something was on Pitt's mind and he went into neutral. 'I assume you have a good reason.'

'Are you aware of a huge facility built and owned by Odyssey on an island in Lake Nicaragua that sits directly over the tunnels?'

'The closest I can come is a report I read on Odyssey expanding a canal from the ocean into the lake to allow entry for cargo ships.' Sandecker paused. 'Come to think of it, the report was vague about the dock facilities the Nicaraguans were building a few miles east of Managua.'

'The report was vague because the dock facilities were built at Odyssey's complex on Isla de Ometepe, for their private use only. And I propose Al and I go into the complex and investigate.'

'After your narrow escape from the tunnels, you're pushing your luck. How do you plan to sneak inside?'

'We'll come in from the water.'

TEN MINUTES after Sandecker had conversed with Pitt, the admiral was staring at Hiram Yaeger incredulously. 'You're saying the tunnels were built to divert the South Equatorial Current, which would in turn cause the temperature of the Gulf Stream to drop?'

'According to Max's computer model,' said Yaeger, 'by eight degrees by the time it reaches Europe.'

Gunn looked up from the data files. 'The effects on Europe's climate would be cataclysmic. The entire continent would go into a deep freeze for eight months out of the year.'

'Let us not forget the effect of the Gulf Stream on the east coast of the United States and Canada,' added Yaeger. 'Every state along the Atlantic shore would suffer.'

'What would be the results of such a freeze?' asked Sandecker.

Yaeger spread several papers across Sandecker's desk and began quoting the data. 'In the beginning, thousands of homeless people would die from hypothermia. Many more thousands might also die once the heating supplies disappeared because of staggeringly high demand. Ports would freeze throughout the Baltic and the North Sea, stranding ships carrying oil and liquefied natural gas used for heating, not to mention millions of tons of imported food. Most agricultural yields would be halved and so food shortages would be magnified. Transport would come to a halt because of freezing conditions and a lack of fuel. Electrical power shortages would come with severe winter storms. The European economy would go into complete chaos.

'And that's only half the story. Further disruption and misery would come with the rising temperatures and heavy rains in the late spring when rivers swelled by melted snow would burst their banks and cause massive flooding.'

Gunn and Sandecker remained silent for a few moments. Then Gunn spoke the thought on everyone's mind. 'What does Spectre have to gain by such an atrocious scheme?'

Yaeger showed the palms of his hands in a helpless gesture. 'Max has yet to come up with an answer.'

'There has to be a rationale,' said Gunn. 'The return on investment for digging those tunnels would have to be astronomical to pay for the excavation. What can he possibly gain?'

Sandecker stared at Gunn through his authoritative blue eyes. 'Pitt and Giordino might just come up with some answers. They're going to make a clandestine inspection of a secret Odyssey installation on an island in Lake Nicaragua.'

THE SILENCE over Lake Nicaragua's dark waters was fractured by the muted hum of a jet ski's motor. It raced through the night at a speed of over fifty knots, invisible to radar because of a soft rubber mantle that absorbed the radio-wave pulse and stopped the echo from returning to the radar's transmitter.

Pitt steered the Polaris Virage TX, with Giordino on the rear seat and a bag full of equipment in the bow storage. Along with their dive gear, they also carried their stolen Odyssey jumpsuits.

As they skirted the shoreline of the isthmus, staying a mile off the

beach that stretched between the two mountains, they saw the lights of the complex shining against the black slopes of Mount Concepción.

Pitt slowed the jet ski as they approached the dock, where cranes were off-loading cargo containers from a large, floodlit COSCO ship.

Giordino was studying a basic, handheld radar detector.

'How's it look?' Pitt asked, glancing towards a pair of searchlights that were sweeping the water 500 yards offshore.

'Their beam sweeps past us without pausing, so they must not be reading us.'

'Our depth sounder reads the bottom at only twenty-two feet. We must be out of the main channel.'

'Time to abandon ship and get wet,' Giordino said, motioning towards a patrol boat that appeared round the end of the long dock.

Already in their light wet suits, they quickly pulled their dive gear and packs from the jet ski's storage area. The Virage was a stable craft and they could stand while helping each other slip into their oxygen closed-circuit rebreathers. After quickly going through the pre-dive checking procedures, Giordino slid into the water while Pitt aimed the jet ski towards the west shore of the lake and opened the throttle as he slid off. Neither man took a backward glance at the speeding craft before diving beneath the surface.

Giordino trailed behind Pitt, tracing his movement in the ink-black water by using an underwater penlight which sent out a thin beam that was next to impossible to spot from the surface. As they came to the main shipping channel Pitt checked his compass and began kicking towards the Odyssey dock. In the distance, magnified by the water, he and Giordino could hear the thrash of the patrol boat's twin screws.

They homed in on the dock, swimming slowly and seeing the water on the surface become less black as they came closer to the lights of the loading area. They could also see the sweep of the searchlights streaking across the surface above them.

Another 100 yards and they could make out the faintly shimmering outline of the dock pilings as they skirted round the big COSCO container ship. All activity had come to a standstill; the big cranes were immobile and the warehouses were deserted.

The lights from the docks now provided them with a good thirty feet of underwater visibility. They swam between the pilings under the dock before surfacing and staring up at the wooden planking, waiting to see if they had set off any security sensors.

After a few minutes, Pitt said, 'We'll follow the dock until it reaches the shore before we surface again.'

This time Giordino moved off into the lead, with Pitt following. The bottom came up sharply and they were relieved to find a sandy beach free of rocks. Crouching under the dock and shielded from the overhead lights, they removed their dive gear and wet suits, opened their waterproof bags and retrieved their Odyssey jumpsuits and hard hats. Slipping on socks and shoes, they stepped warily into the open.

A single guard sat in a small hut at the entrance to the dock.

'Now to see if we can freely move throughout the facility,' said Pitt.

They walked casually past the guardhouse.

The guard caught their movement and came out onto the road. '*La parada!*' he shouted, a frown on his face.

'*La parada*?' Giordino repeated.

'It means halt,' Pitt whispered.

'*¿Para qué están ustedes aquí? Ustedes deben estar en sus cuartos.*'

'He wants to know what are we doing here. He said we're supposed to be in our quarters.'

'Not bad.' Giordino grinned. He walked up to the guard as if he didn't have a care in the world. '*Yo no hablo el español*,' he said. 'We're Canadian.'

The guard frowned, then smiled. '*Sí*, Canadians, I speak English.'

'I know we're supposed to be in the barracks,' said Pitt, smiling back. 'We only wanted to take a little walk before going to sleep.'

'No, no, that is not allowed, *amigos*,' said the guard. 'You are not allowed out of your assigned area after eight o'clock.'

Pitt threw up his hands. 'Sorry, *amigo*, we were talking and didn't notice we had wandered into the wrong area. Now we're lost. Can you direct us to the barracks?'

'You from the dig?'

'Yes. Our superior sent us topside for a few days' rest.'

'I understand, *señor*, but you must return to your quarters. It is regulations. Just follow the road and turn left at the water tower.'

'*Gracias, amigo*,' said Pitt. 'We're on our way.'

Satisfied Pitt and Giordino were not intruders, the guard returned to his little hut.

Giordino said, 'Well, we passed the first test.'

'Best we hide out somewhere until daylight. Not healthy to wander around here in the dead of night. Too suspicious. The next guard who stops us might not be so friendly.'

They followed the main road until they came to a long row of buildings and moved in the shadows on the edge of a grove of palm trees, studying the entrances to the living quarters for the Odyssey

employees. All were free of guards except the fifth and last building which had two guards at the entrance, while another two patrolled a high surrounding fence.

'Whoever lives there must not be popular with Odyssey,' said Pitt. 'It looks like a prison.'

'Then we break into one that's open.'

Pitt shook his head. 'No, we enter this one. We may learn more about Odyssey's operation. Looks like a small shed next door. Let's check it out.'

'You never take the easy path,' Giordino groaned.

Like burglars they slinked through the palm trees. Crouched and running, they covered thirty yards to the rear of the shed where they found a door. It was unlocked and they slipped inside. Flashing their penlights round the interior, they saw it held a street sweeper.

'Let's start up the sweeper and set it on fire to get the guards' attention,' said Pitt.

Giordino smiled. 'Your devious mind never ceases to amaze me.'

They found a five-gallon can of gasoline and an acetylene torch. Pitt climbed into the cab of the sweeper and turned on the ignition, while Giordino swung the shed doors open. The engine started with a cough and Pitt turned the steering wheel, angling the vehicle towards a row of parked trucks. Giordino doused the sweeper with gasoline, and stood holding the flame starter for the acetylene torch. 'Showtime,' he said.

Pitt jammed the sweeper into gear and leapt from the cab as Giordino turned the oxygen and acetylene valves full open and squeezed the handle of the torch, sending a two-foot flame bursting from its tip. There was a loud *whoosh* as a ball of fire enveloped the sweeper as it accelerated through the doorway. With its brushes spinning and throwing up a cloud of dust, it sped fifty yards before crashing into the first truck and sending it bouncing into a palm tree. Then it smashed into the next truck in the row with a screech of tearing metal, shoving it into the others, until it finally came to a standstill with flames and black smoke shooting into the sky.

The two guards outside the building stared incredulously at the sudden eruption of fire. Reaching the conclusion that the driver was still in the cab, they were finally galvanised into action and went running after the sweeper followed by the guards from the entrance.

Pitt and Giordino took immediate advantage of the commotion. Pitt dashed through the gated fence, dived inside the open door of the building and fell on the floor, only to have Giordino fall on him.

'You've got to lose weight,' Pitt grunted.

Giordino swiftly pulled him to his feet. 'Now where, genius?'

Pitt didn't answer but took off running down a long hallway. The doors on either side had locked latches. He stopped in front of the third door and turned to Giordino. 'This is *your* speciality,' he said, stepping aside.

Giordino shot him a testy look, then leaned back and kicked the door half off its hinges. He lunged with one shoulder to finish the job. The door fell flat with a loud thud and Pitt stepped inside and found a man and a woman sitting upright in bed, frozen in shocked silence at the sight of the strangers.

'Forgive the intrusion,' Pitt said softly. 'But we need a place to hide.' As he spoke, Giordino was already setting the door back in place.

'Where are you going to take us?' the woman asked in a heavy German accent, pulling the covers up around her.

'No place. We're not who you think.'

'But you're one of them.'

'No, ma'am,' said Pitt, trying to ease her terror. 'We are not employees of Odyssey.'

'Then who in God's name are you?' The man in the bed rose. He had on an old-fashioned nightshirt and threw on an equally old-fashioned robe. He was quite tall and thin as a yardstick and his thick grey hair stood at least three inches above Pitt. A sharp pyramid of a nose and tight lips, decorated with a pencil-thin moustache, defined his face.

'My name is Dirk Pitt. My friend is Al Giordino. We work for the United States government and are here to learn why this facility is such a well-guarded secret.'

As he spoke, the sound of sirens could be heard echoing through the still-open front entrance.

'Do you mind telling us why you're confined inside this building?' queried Pitt.

The woman recovered her composure. 'My husband is Dr Claus Lowenhardt, and I am Dr Hilda Lowenhardt. We are only locked in at night. During the day we work under heavy guard in the laboratories.'

'We were doing research at the Technical Research Institution in Aachen, Germany,' said Claus, 'when agents working for Mr Spectre requested that we come to work for the Odyssey Corporation as consultants. My wife and I are only two out of forty top scientists in our field who have been lured away from their laboratories by offers of an immense amount of money and promises of funding for our projects after we returned home. We were told we would be flying to Canada,

but when our plane landed we found ourselves on this island in the middle of nowhere. Since then, we have worked as slaves.'

'For how long?'

'Five years.'

'What type of research are you forced to conduct?'

'Our academic discipline is the science of fuel-cell energy.'

'Is that why this facility was constructed, to conduct experiments on fuel cells?'

Claus nodded. 'Odyssey began construction nearly six years ago.'

'What about outside contact?'

'We are not allowed telephone communications with our friends and families,' replied Hilda, 'only outgoing letters, heavily censored.'

'Five years is a long time to be away from your loved ones. Why didn't you obstruct the research by slowdowns and sabotage?'

Hilda shook her head solemnly. 'Because they threatened anyone who hampered the research with a horrible death.'

'And the lives of our families back home as well,' added Claus. 'We had no choice but to put forth a dedicated effort. We also had a true desire to continue our life's work, to create a clean and efficient energy source for the people of the world.'

'We do what we're told to do,' said Hilda quietly. 'Whatever it takes to prevent harm from coming to our son and two daughters and five grandchildren. The others are in the same boat.'

'Have you and your fellow scientists made any progress in developing fuel-cell technology?' asked Pitt.

Hilda and Claus turned to each other with quizzical expressions. Then Claus said, 'Hasn't the world learned of our success? Along with our fellow scientists, we have developed an energy source that combines nitrogen-producing ammonia and oxygen out of the atmosphere to create electricity at a very low cost, with pure water as its only waste product, thus paving the way to non-polluting energy that is available to millions of people.'

'You talk as if it is already in production,' said Giordino.

'It was perfected and tested with great success over a year ago. Production began immediately. We were told that millions of units had already been produced by a manufacturing facility in China.'

'Sorry to disappoint you, but your great achievement is still a secret,' Pitt said sympathetically. 'I can only guess that the Chinese are stockpiling your creation for some inexplicable purpose.'

'But what do the fuel cells have to do with Odyssey's tunnels?' Giordino muttered.

Pitt sat down in a chair and stared thoughtfully at the design in a rug. Finally, he looked up. 'The admiral said that Yaeger's computer concluded that the purpose behind the tunnels was to lower the temperature of the Gulf Stream and throw the eastern United States and Europe into eight months of frigid weather.' He turned to the Lowenhardts. 'What does the gadget in production accomplish?'

Claus winced at the word 'gadget'. 'The Macha is a self-sustaining generator that can provide cost-efficient electrical energy to every home, office, workplace and school in the world. It makes air pollution a nightmare of the past. Now a family home, no matter how large or small, located in the city or in the farthest reaches of the country, can have its own independent source of energy . . .'

'You call it the Macha?'

'Spectre came up with the name himself when he saw the first operational unit. Macha, so he informed us, was the Celtic goddess of cunning, also known as the queen of phantoms.'

'The Celts again,' muttered Giordino. 'The plot thickens.'

Pitt gave the Lowenhardts a long, hard look. 'We're going to have to leave the island and you must come with us.'

'No!' Hilda gasped. 'We don't dare leave. Once the fiends at Odyssey learn we are missing, they will retaliate and murder our children.'

Pitt took her hand and gently squeezed it. 'Your family will be protected. I promise you, no harm will be allowed to come to them.'

Giordino took Pitt to one side. 'I'm not sure,' he said in a low voice. 'Once we abandoned the jet ski our only plan for escaping the island was to attempt to steal a boat or an airplane, since their security forces would stop any helicopter pick-up. That plan won't come easy with a pair of senior citizens in tow.'

'These people are the key to the mystery,' said Pitt. 'Because of what they know, we don't have to take the chance of getting caught nosing around the facility.' He turned back to the Lowenhardts. 'What you haven't considered is that when your usefulness is over, you and the other scientists will have to be eliminated. Spectre cannot risk any of you revealing to the world what went on here.'

'They wouldn't dare kill us all. The outside world would discover the truth,' said Claus.

'Not if a plane carrying you back home mysteriously crashed in the sea. No one would be the wiser about what really happened.'

Claus looked at his wife and placed an arm round her shoulders. 'I'm afraid Mr Pitt is right. Spectre could not allow any of us to live.'

'Once you reveal everything to the media, Spectre will not dare kill

the other members of your scientific team. Every law enforcement agency would band together and go after him and his empire. Believe me, leaving with us is the only way.'

'Can you guarantee that you'll get us off the island safely?' asked Hilda hesitantly.

Pitt looked concerned. 'I can't promise what I can't predict with certainty. But you will surely die if you remain here.'

Claus squeezed his wife's shoulder. 'This looks like our chance to see our loved ones again.'

She kissed him on the cheek. 'Then we go together.'

'Guards approaching,' announced Giordino, his ear to the door.

'If you will kindly get dressed,' said Pitt to the Lowenhardts, 'my friend and I will take care of the guards.' Then he turned his back as the scientists began getting their clothes, and took up a position at the doorway opposite Giordino, Colt .45 held at the ready.

They waited until the sound of the guards came outside the door. Then Giordino yanked the broken door inwards, sending it crashing to the floor. The security guards were too surprised to offer resistance, as they were pulled into the room and found themselves staring into the muzzles of two very large automatic pistols.

'*¡En el piso, rápidamente!*' Pitt snapped, ordering them to lie on the floor as Giordino began tearing up the bed sheets. They quickly disarmed, bound and gagged the stunned guards.

Five minutes later, Pitt, Claus, Hilda and Giordino passed through an unguarded gate in the fence and slipped into the shadows.

ten

They had a long way to go—the hangars at the end of the airstrip were over a mile across the facility from the Lowenhardts' prison quarters. But they now had the assistance of the scientists, who were familiar with the layout of the island.

Claus Lowenhardt fell back to talk softly to Giordino. 'Is your friend truly in control of our situation?'

'Let's just say that Dirk is a man of infinite resource.'

'You trust him?'

'With my life. I've known him almost forty years and he hasn't failed me yet.'

'Is he an intelligence agent?'

'Hardly.' Giordino could not suppress a soft laugh. 'Dirk is a marine engineer. He's Special Projects Director for the National Underwater and Marine Agency. I'm his second-in-command.'

'God help us!' Lowenhardt muttered. 'If I had known you were not highly trained undercover CIA agents, I would have never come with you and risked my wife's life.'

'Your lives couldn't be in the hands of a better man,' Giordino assured him, his voice low.

Pitt moved from one structure to another, trying to stay away from the floodlights on the roofs of the buildings. It was not an easy journey. The facility was brightly lit from one end to the other, to discourage anyone from trying to escape.

Pitt scanned the territory through binoculars, checking for evidence of guards lurking in the shadows. 'It seems unusually empty of patrols,' he murmured.

'That's because the guards turn the dogs loose until morning,' said Hilda.

Giordino came to a halt. 'You didn't say anything about dogs . . . I'll bet they're Dobermans,' he moaned. 'I hate Dobermans.'

'We're lucky we got this far,' Pitt said frankly. 'We'll have to be doubly careful from now on.'

Pitt was about to lower his binoculars when he detected a high chain-link fence with barbed wire running along the top. He could see a gate on the road leading to the airstrip, guarded by two women in jumpsuits. Three unleashed dogs nosed the ground in front of the gate. They were Dobermans.

'We have a fence barring the road to the airstrip,' he said, passing the binoculars to Giordino.

Giordino peered through the lenses. 'Did you notice there is a smaller fence running a few feet in front of the big one?'

'No doubt built to protect the dogs?'

'To keep them from turning crispy-crunchy.' Giordino paused and scanned the fence a hundred yards in each direction. 'The main fence probably has enough electrical juice running through it to barbecue a buffalo.' He paused to check the neighbourhood. 'And not a vacant street sweeper in sight.'

Abruptly, the ground began to move and a low rumbling sound swept the facility. The trees swayed and the windows of the buildings rattled. It was a tremor like the ones they experienced on the river and inside the lighthouse. This one lasted longer, over a minute. The

Dobermans went into a barking frenzy as the guards milled around uneasily. There would be no creeping up undetected while the dogs were excited and alert.

'How long have you experienced these tremors?' asked Pitt.

'They began a year ago,' replied Hilda. 'They've increased in frequency until now they often come less than an hour apart.'

'They've also amplified in intensity,' added Claus. 'According to geophysicists on our research team, some unexplained phenomenon beneath the mountain has caused its surface to shift. A catastrophic flank collapse might take place at any time.'

'What would be the consequences?' Giordino asked.

'A cubic mile of rock could be sent sliding down the mountain slope towards the lake at up to eighty miles an hour.'

'That would trigger massive waves once it hit water,' said Pitt.

'Yes, the waves could easily wipe out every town and village surrounding the lake. And since the Odyssey facility covers a good part of the volcano's slope, the entire works would be swept away and buried.'

'Isn't Odyssey management aware of the threat?'

'They called in their own geologists, who argued that flank collapses only happen somewhere in the world every ten thousand years. My understanding is that word came down from Mr Spectre that there was no threat and to ignore it.'

'Spectre isn't noted for being considerate of his employees' welfare,' said Pitt, recalling the incident on board the *Ocean Wanderer*.

Suddenly the unmistakable sound of a helicopter came from the direction of the air terminal and everyone stiffened and stared up into the star-peppered sky. Illuminated by the floodlights on the ground, the lavender colour was clearly visible. They all stood pressed against the wall of a building, as the rotor blades pounded the night air, moving towards them.

'They're looking for us,' rasped Claus, clutching his wife.

'The pilot isn't circling in a search pattern,' Pitt asserted. 'They're not onto us yet.'

The craft passed directly over them, not more than 200 feet above, then banked sharply towards the roof of a glass-walled office building, hovered and settled.

Pitt took the binoculars from Giordino and trained them on the aircraft as it landed and the rotor blades slowed to a stop. The door came open and several figures in lavender jumpsuits crowded round the steps. A woman stepped down, wearing a gold jumpsuit. Pitt would have bet a year's pay that she was the woman who called herself Rita

Anderson. His face tightened with anger as he passed the binoculars back to Giordino. 'Look closely at the queen in gold.'

Giordino studied the woman as she and her retinue walked towards the elevator that led down from the roof. 'Our pal from the yacht. The one who murdered Renee. My kingdom for a sniper rifle.'

'Nothing we can do about her,' Pitt said regretfully. 'Our number-one priority is to get the Lowenhardts to Washington in one piece.'

'And speaking of one piece, how are we getting past an electric fence, three Dobermans and two heavily armed security guards?'

'Not past,' Pitt said quietly, 'but *over*.'

Giordino followed Pitt's gaze towards the helicopter on the top of the office building a block away, his expression cool and focused. Wordlessly, a plan took root between them.

Pitt took the binoculars from Giordino again, and studied the building. 'The headquarters of the facility,' he said. 'It looks unguarded.'

'No reason for them to lock people inside. All the workers are loyal employees of Odyssey.'

'And no paranoia about unwanted guests entering through the front doors.' Pitt tilted the glasses. The pilots followed Rita into the elevator, leaving the helicopter seemingly deserted. 'We'll never have a better opportunity.' He walked up to the Lowenhardts, who were standing with their arms round each other, looking apprehensive. 'We're going to enter the headquarters building and ascend to the roof, where we will appropriate the helicopter,' he said. 'Stay close to me. If we run into trouble, drop to the floor. We can't have you obstructing our line of fire. Al and I will try to make it look like we're escorting you to a meeting or interrogation or whatever scam works best. Once we reach the roof, hurry into the aircraft quickly and tighten your seat belts. The takeoff might be very rough.'

Claus and Hilda solemnly assured him they would follow his instructions to the letter. They had no choice.

They all walked quietly, this time with Giordino in the lead until they reached the steps up to the entrance of the headquarters. Two women, one in lavender, the other in a white jumpsuit, were standing just outside, smoking cigarettes. Giordino smiled politely and they passed through the big glass door into the lobby, where several women and one man were in conversation. Those who glanced at Pitt and the others as they passed did so without suspicion.

As if it was an everyday routine, Giordino hurried the group into an empty elevator. But before he could push the button for the roof, an attractive blonde woman in lavender entered, and pressed the button

for the eighth floor. She turned and studied the Lowenhardts, and a look of wariness came to her eyes. 'Where are you taking these people?' she asked Giordino.

Giordino hesitated. 'I speak only a little *inglés*.'

She studied his face and for the first time took a good look at the Lowenhardts. Her face clouded. 'What is going on here? I know these people. They're supposed to be confined at night in the prison building. Where are you taking them?'

'To the nearest bathroom,' Pitt answered nonchalantly.

She reached out to stop the elevator at the next floor, but Pitt slapped her hand down.

She looked at him in disbelief. 'How dare you? You're crazy!'

'Like a fox.' The elevator stopped on the eighth floor, but Pitt pushed the 'close door' button. The doors remained shut, the motor hummed and the elevator continued upwards to the roof.

Confused, the woman opened her mouth to scream. Pitt showed no hesitation in ramming his right fist into her jaw. She went down like a sack of wet flour and Giordino grabbed her under the arms before she hit the floor. He pulled her into a corner, where she was out of sight when the doors opened.

With apparently infinite slowness, the elevator rose the final few feet and eased to a halt on the roof. The doors spread apart and they exited. Right into a group of four uniformed security guards who had been standing out of sight behind a large air-conditioning unit.

The guards were as surprised to see the group as Pitt was to see them. Three wore the blue jumpsuits, the fourth was a woman dressed in green. Pitt guessed she was of a higher rank. Unlike the men, she carried no assault rifle. Her only weapon was an automatic pistol in a holster on her hip.

Pitt quickly took the initiative. He walked up to the woman. 'Are you in charge here?' he asked, in a voice calm and authoritative.

The woman stared at him. 'I'm in charge. What are you doing here?'

He motioned to the Lowenhardts. 'We found these two wandering around the fourth floor. Nobody knew how they came to be there. We were told to turn them over to the guards on the roof. That's you.'

The woman studied the Lowenhardts, who were looking at Pitt with growing shock and fear in their eyes.

'I know these people. They are scientists who work on the project. They're supposed to be confined to their quarters.'

'There was a disturbance, a vehicle caught fire. They must have escaped during the commotion.'

The female guard looked confused. 'Who told you to bring them to the roof?'

Pitt shrugged. 'A lady in a lavender jumpsuit.'

The three guards with the assault rifles appeared to relax. They seemed to buy the story, even if their superior was doubtful.

'What are your work positions?' she demanded.

Giordino took a few steps towards the helicopter, turned his head away and looked as if he was admiring it.

Pitt stared directly into the woman's eyes. 'We work down in the tunnels. Our supervisor sent us topside for two days' rest.' Out of the corner of one eye he saw Giordino slowly, imperceptibly, move behind the guards.

The woman nodded. 'That doesn't explain why you are in headquarters at this time of night.'

'We've been ordered back down tomorrow and were instructed to come here and pick up our passes.'

'What passes? I know of no passes issued to tunnel workers.'

'I only do what I'm told,' he said, acting irritated. 'Do you want to take charge of these prisoners or not?'

Before she could reply, Giordino had his big gun in one hand. In one lightning motion, he lashed the barrel against one guard's head and then swung it hard against the head of the second guard. The third removed his hands from his rifle when he saw the gaping muzzle of Giordino's 50-calibre automatic aimed between his eyes.

'That's much better,' Pitt said quietly. He turned to Giordino and smiled. 'A creditable piece of work.'

Giordino returned a slight grin. 'I thought so.'

'Take their guns.'

The woman's hand crept towards her holstered pistol.

Pitt said, 'I wouldn't if I were you.'

The female guard's face was a mask of wrath, but she knew the odds were against her. She raised her hands as Giordino removed her gun.

Pitt pointed at the guard who was still standing. 'Remove your uniform. Quickly!'

The guard unzipped the front of his jumpsuit and stepped out of it. Pitt did the same with his black suit, then slipped into the blue one.

'Down on the roof next to your men,' Pitt ordered the woman and the half-naked guard.

'What are you up to?' Giordino enquired casually.

'Like the airlines, I hate taking off with a half-empty aircraft.'

Without further probing, Giordino knew what Pitt had in his mind.

He stood over his prisoners so they could see his gun muzzle swing from head to head, then he looked at the Lowenhardts. 'Time to board,' he said firmly.

The two elderly people climbed into the helicopter as Pitt walked to the elevator. A few seconds later, the door closed and he was gone.

INSIDE AN OFFICE PENTHOUSE on the tenth floor, just below the roof, stretched a magnificent suite of rooms, decorated in a tidal wave of lavender. The enormous domed ceilings were painted with scenes depicting strange religious rituals and women in flowing dresses dancing against backgrounds of forests, lakes and mountains. The wall-to-wall carpet was lavender flecked with gold, its pile almost ankle deep. The chairs were carved from white marble and padded with lavender cushions. The walls and massive curtains were done in the same colour, but in a rich velvet.

Two women were reclining on a long couch. An ornate glass table stood between them with a bucket containing a bottle of champagne with a lavender label. One of the women was attired in a golden gown, the other was dressed in purple. Their long red hair matched precisely, as if they used the same hairstylist. If they had not moved, an observer might have thought they were part of the outrageous décor.

The lady in purple sipped her champagne from a tulip-stemmed glass and said in a voice devoid of inflection: 'Our timetable is on schedule. Ten million units of Macha will be ready for retail by the first snowfall. After that, our friends in China will have their assembly lines fully operational. Their new factories will go on line by the end of summer and production will soar to two million units a month.'

'Are distribution channels in place?' asked the lady in gold, who was devastatingly beautiful.

'Warehouses throughout Europe and the northeastern United States are already receiving shipments from China's cargo fleet.'

'Have you arrived to open the tunnels?'

The lady in purple nodded. 'September the 10th is the date. Our scientists estimate that it will take sixty days to bring down the temperature of the Gulf Stream to a point at which it will cause extreme cold in the northern latitudes.'

The lady in gold smiled and poured another glass of champagne. 'Then everything is in place.'

The other nodded and raised her glass. 'To you, Epona, who will soon become the most powerful woman in the history of the world.'

'And to you, Flidais, who made it happen.'

PITT HAD SURMISED CORRECTLY that the main office suite would be on the floor below the roof. The office workers had left hours earlier and the halls were empty when he stepped from the elevator. Wearing the blue jumpsuit of a security guard, he had no problem walking past two other guards, who paid scant attention as he passed into the anteroom of the main suite. He found it unguarded so he quietly pushed open the door and stepped inside, only to freeze, overwhelmed by the décor.

He heard voices in the next room and slipped behind lavender curtains at the side of an arched doorway. He saw the two women lounging on the couch, and scanned the ostentatious suite, which in his mind would have made the fanciest brothel look like a railroad shack. He stepped past the curtains and stood in the doorway, admiring the beauty of the two women as they conversed without seeing him.

'I've hired an international investigation company to track them down,' said Flidais.

Epona leaned back comfortably against thick pillows. 'Any idea of their identities?'

'I suspect they were the NUMA members I escaped from after they destroyed our yacht.'

'You think our efforts for secrecy have been compromised?'

Flidais shook her head. 'Not yet. Our agents have reported no activity by US intelligence agencies to investigate the tunnels. There has been a strange silence. It's as if those devils from NUMA disappeared off the face of the earth.'

'I'm hoping the reason for their silence is that they haven't put two and two together and found a threat.'

'We need not be concerned. It's too late for the Americans to stop our operation. And besides, it's doubtful they've discovered the tunnels' true purpose. Only eight more days and they will be open, and we'll be pumping the South Equatorial Current into the Pacific.'

'On the other hand,' Epona added thoughtfully, 'one would think they'd seek retaliation for the murder of a member of their crew.'

'An execution that was a matter of necessity,' Flidais assured her.

'I disagree,' said Pitt. 'Murder is never a matter of necessity.'

THE CHAMPAGNE GLASS held between Epona's manicured fingers fell silently to the thick carpet. Both heads whirled round, long hair snapping like whips. The long-lashed eyes flashed from surprise to irritation at the unauthorised intrusion by one of their own security personnel. Then came surprise at seeing Pitt's Colt aimed in their direction.

Pitt caught the flick of Epona's eyes towards a small golden remote control on the carpet under the glass table. Her foot slipped towards it.

'Not a smart move, dear heart,' he said casually.

She stopped, her toe inches from one of the buttons, and slowly withdrew her foot.

In that instant Flidais recognised Pitt. 'You!' she said sharply.

'Hello, Rita, or whatever you call yourself.' His eyes swept the room. 'You seem to have come up in the world.'

The amber-brown eyes glared at him. 'How did you get in here?'

'Don't you like my designer jumpsuit?' he said, as if modelling at a fashion show. 'It's amazing the doors they open.'

'Flidais, who is this man?' Epona asked.

'My name is Dirk Pitt. Your friend and I met off the coast of Nicaragua. She wore a yellow bikini and owned an elegant yacht.'

'Which you destroyed,' Flidais hissed like a flared cobra.

'I don't recall you giving us a choice.'

'What do you want?' demanded Epona, staring at him through jade eyes flecked with gold.

'I think it only fair that Flidais—if that's what you call her—answers for her crimes. I'm taking her on a little journey north.'

'Just like that?'

Pitt nodded. 'Just like that.'

'And if I refuse,' Flidais snarled contemptuously.

'Let's just say you won't enjoy the consequences,' he said, placing the muzzle of his Colt .45 against the side of her face.

'You're crude, like most men,' said Epona indignantly.

'It's nice to know I didn't disappoint such an astute and beautiful lady.' He nudged Flidais softly in the back of one shoulder with his gun and followed her from the room, stopping in the doorway to turn to Epona. 'Before I forget, it wouldn't be wise to open the tunnels and divert the South Equatorial Current to send Europe into a deep freeze. I know of a lot of people who might not like it.'

He took Flidais by the arm and led her through the arched doorway, down the hallway and into the elevator.

Inside, Flidais stood straight and smoothed her flowing gown. 'You're not only boorish, Mr Pitt, but you're exceedingly stupid as well. You'll never leave the building. There are security personnel on every floor. You don't stand a prayer of passing through the lobby without being apprehended.'

'Who said anything about going through the lobby?'

Flidais's eyes widened as the elevator moved up to the roof.

Pitt prodded her out as the doors opened. 'I don't mean to rush you, but things are about to heat up around here.'

She saw the guards lying on the ground with Giordino standing over them, nonchalantly sweeping the barrel of a gun from one head to the other. Then her gaze turned to the helicopter, and she knew that any hope had flown away on the night air.

Giordino glanced at Flidais, took in her elegant gown and smiled nastily. 'I see you found Rita. You pick her up at a party?'

'A party of two downing expensive vintage champagne. Her name is Flidais. She's coming with us. Keep an eye on her.'

'Both eyes,' Giordino said icily.

Pitt moved swiftly into the cockpit of the helicopter and sat in the pilot's seat. He checked that the fuel shut-off valve was on and took the cyclic and collective friction off. Then with the pedals and throttles moving smoothly, the circuit breakers in and the mixture to full rich, he turned the master switch on. Next came the ignition, and both engines began turning over. Finally, Pitt made certain all warning lights were out. He leaned out of the side window and shouted to Giordino over the whine of twin turbines. 'Jump aboard!'

Giordino lifted Flidais off her feet and flung her inside the craft. Then he climbed in and closed the big sliding door. The interior was stylish and elegant with four large leather seats with burled walnut consoles, one containing a compact office system with computer, fax and satellite television phone. The console between the opposite seats held a bar with crystal decanters and glasses.

The Lowenhardts sat with seat belts buckled, staring mutely at Flidais, who was still sprawled on the floor where Giordino had thrown her. Giordino pulled her erect and dropped her into a seat, buckling her seat belt. He handed the gun to Claus.

'If she lifts her little finger, shoot her.'

'Our agents will be waiting for you when we land in Managua,' Flidais said scornfully.

'I wouldn't be surprised,' Pitt said with a wide grin. 'That's why we're heading to San José, Costa Rica.'

Giordino entered the cockpit and dropped into the copilot's seat. Pitt glanced at the elevator doors and saw them close. Alerted by the woman left in the suite, security guards were waiting for it to descend before they could swarm up to the roof. He reached down and pulled up on the collective, lifting the helicopter into the air. Then he pushed the cyclic forwards, the nose dipped and the MD Explorer soared over the Odyssey facility and between the volcanoes.

'How's your French?' Dirk asked Summer as the pilot settled the plane on its approach to Guadeloupe's Pole Caraibes Airport.

'About as good as your Swahili,' she said, looking radiant in a vibrant flowered skirt and matching blouse. 'Why do you ask?'

'Only the tourists speak English. The locals speak French or a French-Creole dialect.' Dirk handed his sister a small book. 'Here's an English–French dictionary. I'll lean on you for any translations.'

They descended the boarding stairs from the aircraft and walked into the terminal to Health and Immigration, then into the luggage area where they waited for their bags to arrive. After loading them onto a cart, they cleared customs and moved into the lobby of the terminal. A small crowd of thirty or so people stood waiting to greet friends and relatives. One little man in a white suite with the medium-dark skin of a Creole held a sign that read: PITT.

'That's us,' said Dirk. 'This is Summer and I'm Dirk Pitt.'

'Charles Moreau.' The little man held out his hand. 'Your flight was only ten minutes late. That has to be a record.' He bowed, took Summer's hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles. Then he led them through the exit doors and across the street to the parking lot.

He stopped at a BMW 424 sedan, pushed the security lock on his key ring and opened the trunk. Dirk deposited the luggage and they settled into the seats.

Moreau pulled out onto the road leading to Pointe-à-Pitre. 'I've reserved a small suite with two rooms for you at the Canella Beach Hotel. Admiral Sandecker's instructions stated that you were to keep a low profile during your search.'

'Are you an old friend of the admiral?'

'I met James many years ago when I was the Guadeloupe consul in New York. Since I've retired, he hires me on occasion for NUMA business in and around this part of the Caribbean.'

Moreau drove through the lush green hills down to the harbour and along the southeast shore of Grande-Terre, until he reached the outskirts of the town of Le Gosier. Then he took a small dirt road that wound round back to the main thoroughfare.

Summer gazed through her window at houses that sat amid lush, beautifully maintained gardens. 'Giving us a tour of the country?'

'A taxi cab has been hanging on us rather closely since we left the airport,' said Moreau. 'I wanted to see if he was following us.'

Dirk peered through the rear window. 'The green Ford?'

'The same.'

Moreau left the residential section and skirted round a steady

stream of buses, motor scooters and taxis. The driver of the green Ford taxi was hindered by the slow-moving traffic. Moreau made a sharp right turn onto a narrow street between rows of French Colonial buildings. He made a left turn and then another at the next block until he was on the main road again. The taxi stuck to Moreau's rear bumper like glue.

'It's interested in us, all right,' said Dirk.

'Let us see if I can lose him,' said Moreau.

He waited until there was a break in the traffic, then darted into the street across the main road. The taxi driver was impeded by the stream of traffic for a good thirty seconds before he could break through and take up the chase.

Turning a corner and temporarily losing sight of the taxi, Moreau swung into the driveway of a house and parked behind a large oleander bush. A few moments later the green taxi swept past the driveway at high speed and was lost in a dust cloud. They waited for a few minutes before Moreau backed out of the driveway and joined the traffic again on the main road.

'Who can be interested in a pair of representatives from NUMA on a diving expedition?' Moreau asked quietly.

'Somehow, word of our intent arrived ahead of us,' said Dirk. 'Are you familiar with Branwen Island?'

'Enough to know that it's dangerous to go near it,' Moreau said quietly. 'It used to be called Isle de Rouge, because of its reddish volcanic soil. The new owner renamed it. I'm told Branwen was a Celtic goddess known as the Venus of the Northern Seas and the deity of love and beauty. Conversely, among the more superstitious natives it lives up to its reputation as the island of death.'

Dirk was enjoying the warm, scented breeze through his open window. 'Because of treacherous reefs or heavy surf?'

'No,' answered Moreau. 'It's claimed that fishermen or tourists who tried to land on the island were later found dead. They usually washed up at a beach on Basse-Terre many miles away.'

'What about police investigations?'

Moreau slowly shook his head as he switched on his headlights in the growing dusk. 'They found no evidence of foul play. Due to the decomposition when the bodies came ashore, any forensic results were pure speculation. Most were written off as drownings. And yet,' he added, 'rumours circulated that the victims' hearts had been cut out.'

'Sounds morbid,' muttered Summer.

'All the more reason to stay a safe distance offshore.'

'Not possible if we do a sub-bottom survey of the harbour.'

'Just keep a sharp eye out,' said Moreau. 'I'll give you my cellphone number. If you spot trouble, call me immediately. I'll have a police patrol boat on its way within ten minutes.'

Moreau continued down the road for another two miles before turning into the driveway of the hotel, and stopped at the entrance.

'I'll pick you up at nine o'clock tomorrow morning and take you to the dock, where I've chartered a boat for your search,' he said as a porter took their luggage and bags of dive gear into the hotel. 'The sub-bottom profiler, underwater metal detector and jet probe that Commander Rudi Gunn air-freighted from Florida are on board and ready for operation. I also had a small compressor mounted on the deck to run your excavation dredge and jet probe.'

'We're grateful for your help,' said Summer as he kissed her hand.

'And thank you for the interesting ride from the airport,' added Dirk, shaking Moreau's hand.

'Not entirely of my doing,' Moreau said with a little smile. Then his face clouded. 'Please be cautious. Something is going on here that is beyond our grasp. I don't want you to end up like the others.'

WHEN PITT AND GIORDINO exited the plane that Sandecker had chartered for them from San José, the aircraft was surrounded by a uniformed security force from a nearby army base.

Rudi Gunn was standing beside a turquoise NUMA car as Pitt and Giordino dropped down the steps and touched the ground.

'I wonder if I'm ever going to see a shower and a steak dinner,' moaned Giordino, thinking Sandecker had sent Gunn to transport them straight to NUMA headquarters.

'Spare me the pitiful groans,' said Gunn, smiling. 'You'll be glad to know the admiral doesn't want you guys around until tomorrow afternoon. A meeting is set up at the White House at two. You'll be debriefed by the President's advisors.'

The Lowenhardts disembarked and came over to Pitt and Giordino. Hilda kissed Pitt on both cheeks as Claus pumped Giordino's hand. 'How can we ever thank you?' she said.

'We owe you more than we can ever repay,' Claus said, beaming, as he caught sight of the buildings of Washington.

Pitt put an arm round his shoulder. 'You'll be well looked after and I've been assured that your children will be protected and flown here as soon as possible.'

'I promise that your people will have our whole-hearted cooperation.

We'll gladly share our knowledge of nitrogen fuel-cell technology with your scientists.' He turned. 'Right, Hilda?'

'Yes,' she said, smiling. 'Our discovery will be a gift to the world.'

They said their goodbyes as the Lowenhardts were escorted by an FBI agent to a black Lincoln town car for the trip to Washington.

Pitt, Giordino and Gunn then watched as Flidais was hustled from the plane by two burly FBI agents, handcuffed and shoved into a waiting van. She glanced at Pitt with a look of absolute loathing. He grinned and waved before the doors were closed, then climbed into the NUMA car, with Gunn acting as chauffeur.

AFTER A SHORT DRIVE along the Potomac River, Gunn passed through the gate of Ronald Reagan International Airport and drove to Pitt's old hangar which stood at the end of the runways. He dropped Pitt off then drove away.

Pitt climbed up the circular steps to his apartment carrying his suitcase, with his gear bag on his shoulders. He pressed a series of codes into his security system then opened the door and stepped inside.

He took off what he was wearing and stepped into the teak wood shower, turning the water as warm as he could take it and scrubbing his skin until it tingled. When he was through, he towelled off and walked to his bed, settled across the bedspread and fell asleep.

Darkness had fallen when Loren Smith let herself into the hangar and looked around the apartment for Pitt, having been alerted to his arrival by Rudi Gunn. She found him lying naked across the bed, deep asleep. Her lips spread into a sensual smile as she leaned over and pulled a bedspread over him.

When Pitt awoke six hours later, he could see stars through the overhead skylights. His nostrils also detected the aroma of steak on the stove's grill. He saw the bedspread over his body and smiled to himself, knowing Loren had put it there. He rose and pulled on a pair of khaki shorts and a flowered silk shirt, then slipped into a pair of sandals.

Loren looked lovely in a snug pair of white shorts and a striped silk blouse, her arms and legs tanned. She gave out a small sigh when Pitt reached round her waist with his arms and squeezed as he nuzzled her neck. 'How did you know I've been dreaming about steak for five days?'

'I don't have to be a psychic to know—that's all you ever eat. Now sit down and mash the potatoes.'

Pitt did as he was told and sat down at the dining table. He mashed the potatoes in a bowl and spooned them onto two plates as Loren

delivered a porterhouse steak sliced in two. Then she set a Caesar salad on the table and sat down to eat while Pitt opened a cold bottle of Chardonnay.

'I hear you and Al have had a rough time of it,' she said, cutting her steak.

'A few close scrapes, but nothing that called for medical attention.'

She looked into his eyes, violet meeting green. 'You're getting too old to get into trouble. It's time you slowed down.'

'Retire and play golf five days a week at a club? I don't think so.'

'There are research expeditions you could direct that wouldn't be half as dangerous as some you've been involved with.'

'Yes, I could stay at home more,' he said slowly, never taking his eyes away from her face. 'But I would have to have a reason.'

As if she hadn't heard, she said, 'My term in Congress will be up soon, and you know I've announced that I'm not going to run again.'

'Have you thought about what you're going to do when you retire?'

She shook her head slowly. 'I've had offers to head up various organisations, and at least three legal firms have asked me to join their ranks. But I'd rather retire, do some travelling, write that book I've always wanted to write, and spend more time painting. What about you?' she asked, thinking she knew the answer. 'Will you and Al be off again, flirting with death and trying to save the oceans of the world?'

'I can't speak for Al, but I'm going to grow a white beard and play with my old cars until they push my wheelchair into the nursing home.'

She laughed. 'Somehow I can't picture that.'

'I *was* hoping you might come with me.'

She tensed and stared at him. 'What are you saying?'

He took her hand and gripped it tightly. 'What I'm saying, Loren Smith, is that I think the time has come for me to beg for your hand in marriage.'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'You wouldn't . . . you are joking,' she said, her voice choking.

'I'm deadly serious,' he said, seeing the tears form in her eyes. 'I've loved you for what seems an eternity, and I want you to be my wife.'

She sat there trembling, the iron maiden of the House of Representatives, the woman who never backed down, then she took back her hand and held it over her eyes as she sobbed uncontrollably.

He came around the table and embraced her. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.'

She looked up, tears flooding her eyes. 'Don't you know how long I've waited to hear those words?'

Pitt was bewildered. 'When the subject came up before, you always said marriage was out of the question because we were already married to our work.'

'Do you always believe everything a woman tells you?'

Pitt gently raised her to her feet and kissed her lightly on the lips. 'Forgive me for being late as well as stupid. But the question still stands. Will you marry me?'

Loren threw her arms round his neck and flooded his face with kisses. 'Yes, you fool,' she said. 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'

eleven

'Well, you two really have opened a Pandora's box this time,' said Sandecker as Pitt and Giordino walked into the White House conference room the next morning.

'I hope the results of our investigation proved useful,' said Pitt.

'Useful is a major understatement.'

Sandecker turned and quickly introduced the four men standing round one end of a long table. Max Seymour, the President's Security Advisor; Jack Martin, White House Science Advisor; Jim Heckt, Assistant Director of the CIA; and General Arnold Stack, whose exact job at the Pentagon was never fully revealed. They all sat down as Sandecker asked Pitt to report on what he and Giordino found in the tunnels and on Isla de Ometepe.

Pitt started off first, trading off every few minutes with Giordino, each of them filling in what the other overlooked. They wrapped up by telling of their escape off the island with the Lowenhardts and the murderous woman from Odyssey.

The President's men took a few moments to digest the enormity of the looming disaster. Max Seymour looked across the table at Jim Heckt of the CIA with an icy smile on his face. 'Seems like your people dropped the ball on this one, Jim.'

Heckt shrugged uncomfortably. 'No directives were received from the White House to investigate. Our satellite photos showed no indication of a major construction project that could prove detrimental to the security of the United States.'

'And the development facility on Ometepe?'

'We checked it,' answered Heckt, 'and found it was engaging in

alternative power research. So we moved on, since our main objective is observing and analysing the Republic of China's penetration into Central America—in particular, the Canal Zone.'

Jack Martin said, 'I find it troubling that we are still years away from producing an efficient fuel-cell power system. Not only did Odyssey make an astonishing technological breakthrough, but the Chinese are already manufacturing millions of units.'

'We can't lead the world in everything,' said General Stack. He nodded at Pitt and Giordino. 'What you're telling us is that Odyssey lured away a number of the world's leading scientists, took them to the facility in Nicaragua and then coerced them into developing a practical product.'

Pitt nodded. 'That is correct.'

'As soon as the Lowenhardts have recovered from their ordeal, we'll begin interviewing them,' said Martin.

'Which brings us to how to deal with Odyssey and the tunnels,' said General Stack.

'Those tunnels must be blocked—and fast,' Sandecker said. 'Once they are open and millions of gallons of water from the Atlantic is flowing into the Pacific, they'll be much more difficult to destroy. How about sending in a small covert team with explosives to do the job?'

'They'd never penetrate Odyssey's security,' counselled Giordino.

'You and Dirk made it in and out,' said Sandecker.

'We weren't carrying a hundred tons of explosives.'

Pitt had left his chair and was moving around the room, studying the maps and pictures on the walls. He took particular interest in a large satellite photo of the Odyssey R&D facility on Ometepe. He moved in closer and examined the slope of Mount Concepción.

'A B-52 drop of two-thousand-pound penetrating bombs would do it,' suggested Stack.

'We can't go around dropping bombs on friendly countries,' said Seymour, 'despite the threat.'

'Then you admit the potential for a deep freeze is a threat to the nation's security,' Stack cornered him.

'That goes without saying,' Seymour said wearily. 'What I'm saying is there must be a solution that won't make the President and the United States government look like inhuman monsters.'

'There might be another approach,' said Pitt, still looking at the satellite photo. 'An approach that would satisfy everyone involved.' Pitt held their attention; every eye was trained on him. 'I propose we give the job to Mother Nature.'

Martin, the scientist, broke the silence. 'Could you please explain?'

'According to geophysicists, a slope of the Concepción volcano on Ometepe is slipping. This was no doubt caused by the tunnel excavation under the volcano. A sudden slip would cause the volcano's flank to collapse, with catastrophic results. The entire Odyssey research centre and everybody in it would be buried under millions of tons of rock, which would launch a tidal wave around the lake that would wipe out every town and village along the shoreline.'

Seymour gazed at Pitt. 'If what you say is true, the mountain will do the job for us. All we have to do is wait.'

'The wait might last a few days or a few years. We can't just sit on our hands,' Stack said in a hard tone, 'and watch helplessly as the tunnels go into operation.'

'There is another way,' said Pitt. 'Inform the Nicaraguan government that our scientists have monitored the slippage on Mount Concepción by satellite, and its slope is ready to collapse. Scare the hell out of them, then feed them the bait.'

Seymour looked confused. 'Bait?'

'We offer to provide aid for the people inside the facility and to evacuate the inhabitants around Lake Nicaragua. Once they are clear, you can drop a bomb into the side of the volcano from fifty thousand feet, set off the slide and destroy the tunnels.'

'From what I know of the area,' said Martin, 'Mount Concepción is still active. A bomb might set off an eruption.'

'Dropping the bomb down the volcano's crater might induce an eruption,' said Pitt, 'but we should be safe if we guide it to explode on the volcano's slope.'

For the first time, General Stack smiled. 'I believe Mr Pitt has something. I propose we investigate the possibilities.'

'We can't waste time,' Pitt cautioned. 'I overheard the two women in Odyssey's headquarters say they were going to open the tunnels in eight days. That was three days ago. We're now down to five.'

Heckt peered over his glasses at Seymour. 'It's up to you, Max, to get the ball rolling. We'll need the President's approval.'

'I'll have that within the hour,' Seymour said confidently. 'My next job is to convince Secretary of State Hampton to launch immediate negotiations with the Nicaraguan officials to allow our rescue force to enter the country.' He glanced at Stack. 'I'll rely on you, General, to direct the evacuation.' Then it was Jack Martin's turn. 'Jack, it will be your job to convince the Nicaraguan government that the catastrophe is real and imminent.'

Lastly, Seymour stared at Pitt and Giordino. 'We owe you gentlemen a great debt. I only wish I knew how to repay it.'

'There is something,' Pitt said, looking at Heckt. 'I'd like to see your file on Spectre and the Odyssey conglomerate.'

Heckt nodded. 'I'll have one of my couriers bring it to NUMA headquarters. My analysts have studied it in depth, but no flags went up. You think there is something in it that may prove useful?'

'I don't know,' Pitt said honestly, 'but I'm certainly going to give it a hard look. I might run across something that was missed.'

MOREAU WAS WAITING for Dirk and Summer at precisely nine o'clock as they left the lobby of the hotel. The doorman set the duffle bags containing their dive gear in the trunk and they all climbed into the BMW and drove two miles down a winding road to the wharf, where Moreau had arranged for their chartered boat to be moored. He pulled onto a narrow jetty and stopped above a pretty little sailboat that was nestling against the dock. In gold letters across her stern was the name *Dear Heart*.

As Moreau had promised, a metal detector and a sub-bottom profiler were mounted ready for operation in the cockpit. Dirk climbed down a ladder to the deck and caught the bags as they were dropped by Moreau before carrying them down to the cabin.

'A safe voyage,' said Moreau to Summer. 'I shall keep my cellphone on my person at all times. Please call if you encounter trouble.'

'We will,' said Summer. Then she slipped down the ladder and joined Dirk as he started the diesel engine. Moreau cast off the lines, an expression of concern on his face as the little boat motored across the lagoon and out to sea.

Once they cleared the last buoy, Dirk hoisted the mainsail and jib while Summer took the wheel. The canvas sails, crimson against the blue sky, puffed out and the boat began to slip smartly across the growing swells. Dirk looked along the deck. *Dear Heart* looked to be less than a year old, her brasswork and chrome gleaming under the sun. Beyond her bowsprit the sea stretched like a giant carpet.

'How far to Branwen?' asked Summer, heeling *Dear Heart* over on her beam to gain another knot in speed.

'About twenty-three miles,' replied Dirk. 'Put her on a heading due south. No need for a detailed course. The island has a distinctive lighthouse on the eastern end.'

Dirk trimmed the sails while Summer steered, keeping one eye on the islands looming on the horizon and the other on the compass.

After an hour, she lifted a pair of binoculars to her eyes and stared into the distance. 'I think I see the lighthouse,' she said, pointing.

Dirk could just make out a smudge across the horizon which soon became the low shape of an island. 'That will be Branwen. Steer straight towards it. The harbour lies on her south shore.'

A school of flying fish burst from the water in front of the bow and flashed away in all directions. Some leapt alongside the boat as if hoping for food to be thrown over.

Now the island was only three miles distant. The lighthouse was clearly visible, as was a three-storey house on the nearest beach. Dirk picked up the binoculars and peered at it. The windows looked shuttered. There was a dock running from the sandy beach, but no boats.

Dirk took the wheel while Summer went up to the bow, hung on to the rigging and gazed at the island. It was ugly—no thick foliage filled with tropical flowers, no palm trees arching over the beach. Her ears picked up the distant rumble of surf as it struck a reef surrounding a lagoon in front of the house. But she saw no sign of life.

Dirk cast a wary eye over the side at the clear water. The bottom came into view, a smooth sandy bottom clear of coral. He glanced at the echo sounder every few seconds to make sure the seabed didn't take a sudden rise towards the keel. With a firm hand on the wheel, he steered round the island until they were approaching the southern end. He consulted his chart and made a slight course change before entering a channel. The rolling waves of the sea turned choppy as he sailed through a hundred-yard gap in the outer reef.

It was a tricky entrance, but once through the straits, the water calmed. He turned the wheel back over to Summer and dropped the sails. Then he started the little engine and cruised back and forth across the island's small harbour, trying to get a feel for the current and imagining himself on the deck of one of Odysseus's ships, trying to predict where the ancient mariners might have anchored.

Finally, he settled on an area that was sheltered from the winds by a a sandy mound which rose nearly a hundred feet above the shoreline. He shut off the engine and dropped the anchor. 'This looks about as good a place as any to go over the side and inspect the bottom. Let's dive. I'll test the consistency of the sand and silt. You swim around and do a visual inspection.'

Without the need for wet suits to protect them from cold temperatures or sharp coral, they went over the side in only their bathing suits and dive gear. The water was almost as clear as glass, the temperature warm—perfect diving conditions.

Forty minutes later, Dirk climbed up the boarding ladder to the deck and removed his air tank and weight belt. He had run a metal probe under the surface of the sand, checking for a harder clay layer beneath, but had found none. He sat for a few minutes watching Summer's air bubbles travel round the boat. Then he scanned the shoreline, which still seemed deserted. He had a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, as if they were being watched.

Soon, Summer climbed aboard. 'Nothing,' she said, shaking her head as she slipped out of her dive gear.

They continued searching all day, without success. After his final dive, Dirk returned to find Summer gazing at a magnificent sunset with clouds painted red-orange from the enlarged ball of the sun as it fell towards the horizon.

She helped him off with his gear. 'I'll fix dinner if you'll open a bottle of wine.' She looked wistfully at the water, which was turning dark blue as the sun vanished. 'I'm sure there's treasure down there.'

'Maybe not,' Dirk said. 'I can't be certain, but I believe some of the areas I investigated had been disturbed.'

'Disturbed?' she said sceptically. 'By whom?'

Dirk stared apprehensively at the buildings on the island. 'It seemed to me the sand had been moved about by human hands rather than by tides.'

'We'll worry about it tomorrow,' Summer said, turning from the magnificent twilight. 'I'm starved and thirsty.'

Summer heated conch soup and boiled a pair of lobsters that she had caught during her dive. For dessert she served Bananas Foster. Then they laid on the deck, stared at the stars and talked until nearly midnight, listening to the water slap lightly against *Dear Heart*'s hull.

Finally, they decided to turn in. Summer went below to one of the berths while Dirk elected to sleep up on deck, under the open sky.

At four in the morning, the sea was black as obsidian. A light rain came that blotted out the stars. Dirk pulled an oilcloth over himself and contentedly returned to dreamland. He did not waken when they came from the water, silently—three men and one woman. He did not hear the gentle touch of feet on the boarding ladder that he had neglected to pull up. A club came down on the back of his head and he fell into a deep black pit, far beyond dreamland.

IT TOOK FOUR DAYS for Secretary of State George Hampton to convince Nicaraguan President, Raul Ortiz, that the intentions behind the American plan were purely humanitarian. He promised that

once the evacuation was completed, all American forces would leave the country.

As expected, local government officials who were in Spectre's pocket fought the intrusion. But Martin and Sandecker put the fear of God into the leaders of the country by describing the potential catastrophe and the estimated number of dead within a mile of the lake. All opposition was quickly drowned in a river of panic.

Once permission was given, General Stack moved quickly, working closely with General Juan Morega, chief of the Nicaraguan armed forces. All boats around the lake were commandeered to evacuate residents of towns and villages that had no major roads available on which to flee. Trucks and US army helicopters carried the rest to high ground. At the same time a special force was assembled to assault the Odyssey facility.

Stack put Pitt under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Bonaparte Nash, called Bony by those close to him. Nash welcomed Pitt and Giordino at the evacuation team's temporary base at the small city of San Jorge on the western shore of the lake.

'Real good to meet you, Mr Pitt, Mr Giordino. I trust you can lead me and my men to the building where the scientists are kept prisoner.'

'We can,' Pitt assured him.

'If we found it at night,' said Giordino testily, 'we can find it in broad daylight.'

Nash laid out a large satellite photo of the facility on a small table. 'I have five CH-47 Chinook helicopters, each carrying thirty men. My plan is to land one at the air terminal, the second at the docks, a third alongside the building you described as the headquarters, and a fourth in a park area between a row of warehouses. You two will come along with me in the fifth to make certain we have the right building where the scientists are held.'

'If I might make a suggestion,' offered Pitt. He pulled a pen from the breast pocket of his shirt and tapped it on the photo. 'This is the main headquarters building. Your men can land on the roof and seize the top executives of Odyssey before they have time to escape in their own helicopter.'

'How do you know this?' Nash enquired.

'Al and I stole a copter from the roof.'

'They have at least ten security guards in the building that your men will have to deal with,' said Giordino.

Nash looked at them with growing respect. 'There were security guards when you escaped?'

'Yes, four of them,' said Pitt.

Giordino picked up on Nash's surprise, too. 'Overpowering them was like taking candy from a baby.'

'I was told you guys were marine engineers,' said Nash, confused.

'We do that, too,' Giordino said glibly.

'OK, if you say so.' Nash gave a disconcerted shake of his head. 'Now, then, I can't issue you any weapons. You'll be along for the ride as guides. You'll leave any fighting to me and my men.'

Pitt and Giordino glanced at each other with a twinkle in their eyes. Pitt's Colt .45 and Giordino's 50-calibre auto were concealed in the waistbands of their trousers under loose tropical shirts.

'If we get into trouble,' said Giordino, 'we'll throw rocks until your men rescue us.'

Nash wasn't sure if he liked these two wisecracking men. He held up his wrist and studied his watch. 'We take off in ten minutes. After we land, you make certain we've got the right building. We can't lose a minute wandering around lost if we're to save the hostages before Odyssey guards execute them.'

Pitt nodded. 'Fair enough.'

In ten minutes he and Giordino were buckled into their seats inside a big Chinook transport helicopter with Lieutenant Nash, accompanied by thirty big, purposeful-looking men dressed in camouflaged combat fatigues with armoured vests, huge guns and an assortment of rocket launchers.

'Tough bunch,' Giordino said admiringly.

'I'm glad they're on our side,' Pitt agreed.

The helicopter lifted from the ground and took off across the beach and over the lake. It was a short hop of fifteen miles to the Odyssey centre, and it seemed to Pitt that they had no sooner taken off than Nash and his men were leaping through the open hatch and shouting at the security guards at the fenced gate to the hostage quarters to throw down their arms.

The other four copters had landed and received sporadic fire from a few guards who quickly surrendered. They had not been hired to fight professional forces.

Pitt, with Giordino on his heels, rushed through the gate and burst in the front door of the scientists' quarters ahead of Nash and his men. The guards inside were stunned to find themselves looking down the muzzles of two large automatic pistols.

More than surprised to see Pitt and Giordino with weapons, Nash was madder than hell. 'Give me those guns!' he demanded.

He was ignored, as Pitt and Giordino began kicking open the doors to the rooms. They were all empty.

Pitt rushed back to the guards being escorted from the building by Nash's team. He grabbed the nearest man and jammed the Colt against his nose. '*¿Dónde están los científicos?*' The guard's eyes widened as they focused on the muzzle of the gun. '*Ellos fueron tomados lejos a la dársena y colocados en el transbordador.*'

'What's going on?' Nash demanded. 'Where are the hostages?'

Pitt pulled the Colt back from the man's nose. 'He said they were taken to the docks and put on a ferry.'

'It looks as if they're transporting them out onto the lake before sinking the ferry with everyone on it,' said Giordino grimly.

Pitt looked at Nash. 'We'll need your men and a copter to go after them before the Odyssey guards can scuttle the ferry.'

Nash shook his head. 'No can do. My orders are to secure the base and evacuate all personnel. I can't spare any men or a helicopter.'

'But these people are vital to our national interest,' Pitt argued. 'They hold the key to fuel-cell technology.'

Nash's face was hard as stone. 'My orders stand.'

'Then loan us a grenade launcher. We'll go after the ferry ourselves.'

'You know I can't issue weapons to civilians.'

'You're a big help,' snapped Giordino. 'We haven't time to waste debating with a hard nose.' He nodded towards a nearby golf cart like the one he had driven in the tunnels. 'If we can't stop them on the dock, maybe we can chase them in one of Odyssey's patrol boats.'

Pitt threw Nash a look of disgust, then he and Giordino ran for the cart. Eight minutes later, with Giordino at the wheel, they sped onto the dock. An agonised look swept Pitt's face as he saw an old ferry pulling out into the lake, followed by a patrol boat.

'Too late,' groaned Giordino. 'They've taken along a patrol boat to remove the guards after they blow out the bottom of the ferry.'

Pitt ran to the opposite side of the dock and spotted an eighteen-foot Boston whaler tied to a piling no more than twenty yards away. 'Come on, the *Good Ship Lollipop* awaits.' He ran towards the boat.

Pitt started the 150-horsepower motor while Giordino cast off the lines. Giordino had barely thrown the lines onto the dock when Pitt shoved the throttle to its stop and the little whaler leapt over the water in the wake of the ferry and patrol boat.

'What do we do when we reach them?' Giordino yelled over the roar of the motor.

'I'll think of something,' Pitt shouted back.

Giordino eyed the rapidly closing distance between the vessels. 'You'd better come up with something quick. They have assault rifles, and the patrol boat has a nasty cannon on its bow.'

'Try this,' Pitt said loudly. 'I'm going to swing around and put the ferry between us and the patrol boat. That will neutralise its field of fire. Then we come alongside the ferry and jump on board.'

'I've heard of worse schemes,' Giordino said glumly, 'but not in the last ten years.'

'It looks like two, maybe three guards on the upper deck next to the wheelhouse. Take my Colt and play two-gun desperado. If you intimidate them, maybe they'll throw up their hands and surrender.'

'I won't hold my breath.'

Pitt cranked the wheel and spun the whaler in a broad arc, circling round the ferry before the crew of the patrol boat could bring their bow gun to bear. The boat bounced over the crest of a small wave from the ferry's wake and dropped into the trough as a barrage of bullets flew harmlessly overhead. Giordino replied by squeezing both triggers as fast as his fingers could pull. The hail of bullets caught the guards by surprise. One dropped to the deck with a bullet in the leg. Another spun round, clutching his shoulder, while the third dropped his weapon and raised his hands.

'See,' said Pitt. 'I told you so.'

'Sure, after I put two of them out of action.'

Twenty yards from the ferry, Pitt eased back on the throttle and gave the wheel a light twist to starboard. He slipped the whaler along the ferry's hull with barely a bump.

Giordino beat him on board and was disarming the guards as Pitt leapt onto the deck. He threw Pitt his 50-calibre automatic. 'I inserted a full clip. Take it!'

Pitt grabbed it and dropped through an open hatch, scrambling down the ladder to a corridor below. A blast shook the ferry. One of the guards had set off a detonator and the resulting explosion blew a hole in the hull. Pitt was knocked off his feet, but recovered instantly and ran through the central corridor, kicking in doors as he went. 'Out, get out quick!' he shouted to the frightened scientists who had been locked inside. 'This boat is going to sink!' He began herding them towards the ladder leading topside, stopping to ask a man with grey hair and beard, 'Are there any more of you?'

'They locked some of us in a storeroom at the end of the hallway.'

Almost before the scientist got the words out, Pitt rushed to the storeroom door which was too solidly built for him to kick in. 'Stand

back!' he shouted. Then he aimed Giordino's automatic at the latch and fired. The big shell shattered the bolt, allowing Pitt to shove open the door with his shoulder. Ten people stood stunned inside, six men and four women. 'Everybody move, now! Abandon ship before she goes down!'

After he had pushed the last of the scientists up the ladder and was about to follow, a second, larger blast hurled him back against a bulkhead, driving the breath from his lungs and leaving him gasping for air. He blacked out, and when he recovered his senses minutes later, found himself sitting in water up to his chest. Painfully, still dazed from his collision with the bulkhead, he pushed himself to his feet and struggled up the ladder.

He pulled his shoulders and chest over the edge of the ferry's deck and saw that the stern was about to go under. Water was rolling up the deck and flooding into the open hatch. He heard a strange thumping sound and looked up to see Giordino hanging on to a sling, seemingly floating in midair. Then he saw the helicopter. 'Thank God Nash had a change of heart,' he thought.

He grabbed Giordino round the waist as strong muscular arms gripped him under his shoulders. The ferry slipped away beneath his feet and sank below the waves, just as he was hauled into the air.

'The scientists?' he gasped to Giordino. He saw none in the water.

'Lifted on board the copter,' Giordino shouted above the wind and rotor noise. 'The guards fled in the patrol boat.'

'Is everybody off the island?' he asked Nash, who came over and knelt beside him.

'Even the stray cats and dogs,' Nash said with a satisfied grin. 'We pulled off the operation ahead of schedule and then came after you. When you didn't surface with the rest, all except Al here thought you were a goner. Before I could stop him, he'd dropped down on the lift cable to the ferry deck. Only then did we see you.'

'Lucky for me you arrived at an opportune moment.'

'How long before the finale?' asked Giordino.

Nash checked his wristwatch. 'I estimate it will take another thirty-five minutes before the evacuees reach safety. When I receive word all is well, I'll send the signal to the pilot to drop his bomb.'

'Did your teams meet up with a small army of uniformed women who put up a resistance?' Pitt enquired.

Nash nodded. 'They fought like crazy fanatics. Three of my men were wounded. We had to return fire.'

Giordino stared down at the headquarters building as the helicopter

passed over it. The windows were shattered and smoke was rolling from the tenth floor. 'How many did you take down?'

'We counted at least nine bodies.' Nash thought a moment. 'Most of them were really beautiful. And they all had the same red hair.'

THE BOMBER was so high in the sky, they could not see it or detect the B-2 bomb as it fell from 60,000 feet to strike the volcano's slope above the Odyssey facility. Seconds later, a sound like rolling thunder came from Mount Concepción as the slope of the volcano began collapsing, picking up speed until it reached an incredible eighty miles an hour.

Clouds of dust burst into the sky as an enormous wave, over 200 feet high, curled and swept across the lake at astonishing speed, eventually crashing against the shoreline and inundating everything that stood in its path.

In the great research centre created by Spectre, his female directors and his Odyssey empire had vanished. The tunnels were crushed flat.

The South Equatorial Current would not be diverted into the Pacific Ocean. The Gulf Stream would flow as it had for a million years, and there would be no deep freeze across Europe and North America until the next ice age.

twelve

Dirk slowly returned to consciousness, raised himself up on his elbows and looked around him. He was in a small rectangular cell, no more than five feet by three feet. The ceiling, floor and three walls were solid concrete. The fourth wall was filled by a rusty iron door with no handle on the inside. Light filtered through a window in the roof no larger than a pie plate and dimly lit his tiny grey world. There was no bunk, only a hole in the floor for sanitation.

He had never experienced a hangover to match the throbbing inside his head. Rising to his feet was a major effort. Looking down, he saw that his T-shirt and shorts were gone and he was wearing a white silk bathrobe that seemed out of place in the surroundings.

His thoughts turned to Summer. Where was she? He could remember nothing except watching a half-moon rise over the sea before falling asleep on the boat. Someone must have carried him ashore and put him in this cell. But what happened to Summer? In desperation he

pushed hopelessly against the door. Escape seemed impossible.

It was late in the afternoon when Dirk heard a sound outside his cell. There was the click of a lock turning and the door swung outwards. An attractive woman with blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a green jumpsuit, stood with a large automatic pistol aimed squarely at his chest. 'You will come with me,' she said softly.

'Where to?' he asked.

She prodded him with the muzzle of her gun without replying. He was marched down a long corridor and up a stairway. At the top, they passed into a marble-floored hall with gold mosaic walls. At a huge pair of gilded doors, she knocked and then stood aside as the doors were opened from within. She motioned for him to enter.

Dirk was stunned at the sight of four beautiful red-haired women in lavender and gold gowns, sitting round a long table carved from red coral. Summer was also sitting at the table, attired in a white gown.

He rushed over to her and grasped her by the shoulders. 'Are you all right?'

She looked up at him as if in a trance. 'All right? Yes, I'm all right.'

He could see that she was drugged. 'What have they done to you?'

'Please sit down, Mr Pitt,' ordered the woman in gold at the head of the table.

The guard withdrew and closed the door. Dirk slowly pulled out a chair at the opposite end of the table and sat down.

The woman in gold turned to the woman on her right. 'You searched their boat?'

'Yes, Epona. We found some dive gear and underwater detection equipment.'

'I apologise for any intrusion,' said Dirk, 'but we thought the island was deserted.'

Epona stared at him, her eyes hard and cold. 'We have ways of dealing with trespassers.'

'We were on an archaeological expedition to find ancient shipwrecks. Nothing more.'

She glanced at Summer, then back to Dirk. 'We know what you were searching for. Your sister was most cooperative in providing us with a full report. You and she work for the National Underwater and Marine Agency and you are here looking for Odysseus's lost fleet which Homer described as being sunk by the Laestrygonians.'

'You have read Homer.'

'I live and breathe Homer—Homer the Celt, that is, not Homer the Greek.'

'Then you know the story of Troy and of Odysseus's voyage across the ocean.'

'It's the reason my sisters and I are here. Ten years ago, after long years of research, we concluded that it was the Celts and not the Greeks who fought the Trojans, and not for the love of Helen but for Cornish tin deposits with which to make bronze. Like you, we retraced Odysseus's journey across the Atlantic. You might be interested to learn that his fleet was destroyed not by huge rocks thrown by the Laestrygonians, but by a hurricane.'

'And the treasure from his lost fleet?'

'Salvaged eight years ago and used to build our Odyssey empire.'

Dirk sat quite still, but his hands were trembling under the table. A warning light blinked on inside his head. These women might allow Summer to live, but he doubted they would let him see another sunrise. 'May I ask what the treasure consisted of?'

Epona shrugged. 'I see no reason to conceal the results. There is no mystery to our achievement. Our salvage teams recovered over two tons of golden objects, plates, sculptures and other decorative Celtic objects. These we sold on the open market, netting just over seven hundred million dollars. All the buyers wished to remain anonymous and all the transactions were discreetly completed.'

'What about the salvage operators and their divers? They would have expected a share of the spoil, and keeping them quiet would not have been easy.'

'They received nothing,' said Epona sardonically, 'and the secret died with them.'

'You murdered them?'

'Let's simply say, they joined Odysseus's lost crews.' She smiled enigmatically. 'Nobody who came to this island lived to tell of it. Even tourists or fishermen who anchored in the harbour.'

'Why murder innocent people?' cried Dirk. 'What do you, you sociopaths hope to accomplish?'

There was just the slightest edge of anger in Epona's voice. 'You are correct, Mr Pitt. My sisters and I are all sociopaths. We conduct our lives without emotion. That is why we have come so far and accomplished so much in such a few short years. If left to their own devices, sociopaths would rule the world. They are not hindered by ethics, and complete absence of sentiment makes it easier to achieve their goals. Yes, Mr Pitt, I am a sociopath and so is our sisterhood of goddesses.'

'The sisterhood of goddesses,' Dirk repeated slowly. 'So you have elevated yourselves to deities.'

'The great leaders of the past were all sociopaths and a few came very close to ruling the world.'

'Like Hitler, Stalin and Attila the Hun. Mental institutions are overflowing with inmates who have dreams of grandeur.'

'They all failed because they overestimated their power. We do not intend to make that mistake.'

Dirk looked around the table at the beautiful women, noticing that his sister's red hair matched theirs. 'Despite the fact you have the same hair colour, you can't all be blood siblings.'

'No, we are not related.'

'When you say *we*, who do you include?'

'The women of the sisterhood. *We*, Mr Pitt, are the druid religion. We follow the long-lost teachings of the Celtic druids handed down by word of mouth through the generations. They created a religion that inspired and enlightened the Celtic world. It is as relevant today as it was five thousand years ago. What you don't realise, Mr Pitt, is that we are experiencing a renaissance. Druidism is being reborn around the world.'

'Does it still include human sacrifice?'

'If the ritual calls for it.' Epona paused. 'By adhering to the principles of druidism, my sisters and I, under the direction of Mr Spectre, have helped raise a formidable business that reaches around the world in real estate, construction and scientific development, fields that men traditionally dominate. We have found that, collectively, we can outsmart them at every turn. We have built an empire so powerful that soon we will control the economy of most of the Western world through our development of fuel-cell technology.'

'Technology can be duplicated in time. No one, not even you, can hold a monopoly for long. There are too many great scientific minds waiting to improve your model.'

Epona spoke equably. 'They have all been left at the starting gate. Once our operation is up and running, it will be too late.'

'What operation?'

'Your friends at NUMA know.'

A knock came at the door and the woman in the green jumpsuit entered and handed a piece of paper to Epona before leaving the room. Epona studied the message and a hand flew to her mouth. She announced in a voice choked with emotion, 'This is from our office in Managua. Our Ometepe research centre, and the tunnels, have been destroyed by a collapse of the Concepción volcano.'

The news was received in anguish and astonishment.

'It's gone, all gone?' asked one of the women in total disbelief.

Epona slowly nodded. 'It's been confirmed. The research centre now lies at the bottom of Lake Nicaragua. The workers were all saved by boats and helicopters from a United States Special Force that attacked our headquarters. Our sisters, who heroically defended the building, were all killed.'

Epona rose and moved away from her chair. She took Summer by the arm and pulled her to her feet. The two of them walked haltingly towards the door, then Epona turned, her red-contoured lips spreading in a leer. 'Enjoy your last few hours on earth, Mr Pitt.'

The door opened. The guard walked in and pressed the muzzle of her gun against Dirk's temple as he came to his feet in a murderous, frustrated rage.

'And bid farewell to your sister. You won't be enjoying her company again.' Epona placed her arm round Summer and led her from the room.

THE SUN BLAZED DOWN on the asphalt outside the terminal of Managua International Airport as Pitt and Giordino watched the NUMA Citation jet land and taxi towards them. As soon as the plane came to a halt, the door was opened from the inside and Rudi Gunn stepped to the ground.

'Oh no,' Giordino groaned. 'I can smell it in the air. We're not going home.'

Gunn motioned for them to approach the plane. As they neared, he said, 'Climb aboard, we haven't time to spare.'

Without comment, Pitt and Giordino threw their bags into the cargo compartment. They had no sooner sat down and snapped their seatbelt buckles shut, than the turbines roared and the plane was speeding down the runway and rising into the air.

'Don't tell me,' said Giordino drily, 'we're going to spend eternity in Nicaragua.'

'Why the rush?' Pitt asked Gunn.

'Dirk and Summer have disappeared.'

'Disappeared?' said Pitt, with a flash of apprehension in his eyes. 'Where?'

'Guadeloupe. The admiral sent them to an offshore island to search for the remains of Odysseus's fleet of ships, thought to have been destroyed there during his voyage from Troy. Charles Moreau called last night and said that all attempts to contact your son and daughter had proved fruitless.'

'Was there a storm?'

Gunn shook his head. 'The weather was ideal. Moreau rented a plane and flew over Branwen Island, where Dirk and Summer were headed. Their boat had vanished.'

Pitt felt as if a weight was pressing against his chest. 'We're headed there now,' he said, as if it was a point of fact.

Gunn nodded. 'We'll land at the airport in Guadeloupe. Moreau has arranged for a helicopter to take us directly to Branwen.'

'What of this island?' asked Giordino. 'Are there inhabitants?'

A grave expression spread across Gunn's face. 'The island is privately owned, by a woman named Epona Eliade.'

Surprise showed in Pitt's green eyes. 'Epona. Yes, of course, it would be her.'

'Hiram Yaeger ran an extensive check on her. She's at the top level of Odyssey and is reported to be Spectre's right hand.' He stopped and gazed at Pitt. 'You know her?'

'We met briefly when Al and I rescued the Lowenhardts and snatched Flidais. I assumed she was killed during the fighting at Odyssey's research centre.'

'Admiral Sandecker asked the CIA to trace her. One of their agents reported that her private plane was detected by satellite on a landing approach to the airfield on Branwen Island.'

Pitt said quietly, with unshakable conviction in his voice, 'If Epona is responsible for any harm that might come to Dirk or Summer, she'll never live to collect her retirement pay.'

IT WAS DARK when the NUMA jet landed in Guadeloupe and taxied to a private hangar where Moreau was waiting to introduce himself and escort Pitt, Giordino and Gunn to a waiting helicopter.

It took less than fifteen minutes to reach the island. At Pitt's request, once they were over water, the pilot flew without lights, using the beacon on the island as a guide.

In the passenger compartment, Pitt and Giordino opened their bags and put on wet suits, hard rubber boots and weight belts. The only equipment Pitt took was his satellite phone inside a small waterproof bag tightly belted to his stomach. Then they moved to the rear of the compartment and opened the cargo hatch.

Pitt nodded at Gunn. 'I'll call if we need a quick getaway, Rudi.'

Gunn held up his phone and grinned. 'It shall remain glued to my hand until you tell me to evacuate you, Al and the kids.'

The island looked deserted. Pitt could vaguely distinguish the faint

outline of the buildings and in the middle of the island he noticed a huge, concave depression had been carved into the rock, deep enough to be hidden from passing boats. Inside it was a copy of the famous monolithic structure known as Stonehenge. But unlike the hard-grained sandstone of the original structure, the towering stones on Branwen were cut from black lava rock.

The air speed of the helicopter was nearly 120 miles an hour when it came to an abrupt stop, twisting to starboard and allowing Pitt and Giordino to jump through the cargo door into the darkness. Then the pilot pushed the helicopter forwards and picked up speed again, heading out to sea. The entire manoeuvre went off flawlessly. To anyone observing, it hardly looked like the helicopter came to a stop.

Pitt and Giordino dropped thirty feet before striking the water. The neoprene wet suits absorbed most of the impact, then they plunged nearly ten feet into the deep before losing all momentum.

They stroked to the surface to see a pair of searchlights sweeping over the waters of the harbour.

'We'll have to take them out,' said Giordino.

Before the beams found them they dived under, neither one wasting a breath on warning the other. Pitt rolled over on his back at a depth of ten feet and saw the brilliant glow flash over the surface. When the light beams danced away, he and Giordino surfaced, took a breath and dived again. Warily watching the movements of the searchlight and timing its sweep, they began stroking towards the shore, little more than a hundred yards away. At last the lights blinked out and they could resume swimming on the surface. Ten minutes later their feet touched sand. They dropped their weight belts and crept into the shadow of a bank of rocks, resting for a few moments.

'Where to?' asked Giordino in a whisper.

'We've landed south of the house, about two hundred yards east of the Stonehenge replica,' Pitt replied quietly. 'Let's sabotage the searchlights first. It won't do to have them expose us like a pair of rabbits.'

It took them another eight minutes to locate the twin searchlights and the two guards manning them.

Giordino came out of the darkness silently, but the squeak of his rubber-soled boots gave him away and the first man spun round in time to see a shadow coming at him out of the moonless night. He grabbed an automatic rifle and swung the muzzle towards Giordino. He never pulled the trigger. Pitt had come up from the opposite side five steps ahead of his friend. He snatched the rifle out of the guard's hands and clubbed him over the head with the stock. Then Giordino

was on the other guard, knocking him unconscious with a fist to the side of the jaw.

'Doesn't it give you a comfortable feeling to know we're armed?' said Giordino buoyantly, as he handed Pitt one of the rifles.

Pitt didn't bother to reply, as he unlatched the lenses of the searchlights, swung them open, with the slightest of sound, and smashed the filaments. 'Let's check the house next.'

They moved cautiously, the hard rubber boots protecting their feet from the sharp coral that lay between patches of sand.

The house was a large colonial structure with a wide verandah running round it. A light could be seen through a crack in the boards placed over the windows to protect them from the ravages of gales. Pitt moved on his hands and knees to the window and peered through the crack. The room was bare of furniture.

He said to Giordino, 'This place has been abandoned for a long time. They must have some other place for people to stay.'

'It would have to be underground,' said Giordino. 'The only surface structures are the house, the Stonehenge replica and a small aircraft hangar.'

'Why the armed reception committee?' mused Pitt. 'What is Epona trying to hide?'

He was answered by the sound of strange music, followed by an array of coloured lights that flashed on around Stonehenge.

THE DOOR TO DIRK'S CELL clanged as it was thrown open and the female guard motioned him out into the hallway with the muzzle of her rifle. Dirk knew it was useless to question her. She would tell him nothing.

They passed down a long concrete corridor, walking for what seemed almost a mile before coming to a circular staircase. At the top, a landing led through a stone arch to a large, throne-like chair dimly illuminated by a golden light. Two women in blue gowns stepped out of the darkness and chained Dirk to rings set in the chair. One of them tied a black silk gag over his mouth. Then all three women faded back into the darkness.

Suddenly, an array of lavender-coloured lights flashed on and swirled around the interior of a concave stone amphitheatre. Laser beams lit the black sky, illuminating a series of stones spaced round the bowl in a horseshoe shape and a larger outer ring of black lava stones. Within the inner horseshoe Dirk saw a huge block of black marble shaped like a sarcophagus.

He tensed and threw himself forwards, only to be stopped by the chains. His eyes widened in horror as he recognised Summer, in a white gown, spread-eagled on top of the great black stone as if somehow bound to the hard surface. A cold fear ran through him as he struggled like a madman in a futile attempt to break his chains or pull them from their rings.

The lights suddenly went out and the sound of Celtic music echoed among the stones. Ten minutes later they flashed on again, revealing thirty women in colourful flowing gowns, their red hair gleaming under the lights. Epona appeared in her golden gown, stepped up to the black sacrificial altar, raised her hand and began to chant.

'*O, daughters of Odysseus and Circe, may life be taken from those who are not worthy.*'

Epona paused as the other women raised their arms and chanted in unison.

'*Great is the sisterhood for we are the pillars of the world. Great are the daughters of Odysseus and Circe.*'

The chant was repeated, becoming louder before dropping off to inaudible whispers as they lowered their arms.

Dirk could see that Summer was oblivious to her surroundings. She stared at Epona, not seeing her, no fear in her eyes.

Epona reached inside the folds of her gown, produced a dagger and raised it above her head. The other women came up the steps and surrounded her, also holding daggers above their heads.

Dirk screamed in anguish, but his voice was muted by the gag.

Epona then uttered the death chant. '*Here lies one who should not have been born.*'

The knives glinted under the swirling lights.

IN THE SPLIT SECOND before Epona and the others could plunge their daggers into Summer's helpless body, two black phantoms materialised as if by magic in front of the altar. The tall figure grabbed Epona's upraised wrist, twisted it and forced her to her knees, to the utter shock of the women surrounding Summer. Her dagger fell to the ground.

'Not tonight,' said Pitt. 'The show is over.'

Giordino moved like a cat, swinging the barrel of his gun from one woman to another. 'Stand back!' he ordered. 'Drop your knives and move to the edge of the steps.'

Keeping the muzzle of his rifle pressed against Epona's breast with one hand, Pitt picked up Epona's dagger and deftly secured it to his

wet suit, then went about freeing Summer, who was bound to the altar by a single strap across her stomach.

The red-haired women backed away from the altar, but Giordino's muscles tensed as he saw they made no move to drop their daggers, and began moving in a circle round him. He knew this wasn't the time for niceties. He took careful aim, squeezed the trigger of his rifle and shot off the left earring of one of the women who looked as if she carried authority.

The woman seemed incapable of pain or emotion. She merely fixed Giordino with a look of rage.

'I need some help,' he snapped over his shoulder at Pitt, who was busily trying to unbuckle the strap binding Summer to the top of the stone. 'These crazed females are acting like they're about to charge.'

Pitt looked up. He saw the women moving back towards the altar and knew his children would die if thirty hard-core members of the sisterhood rushed them with slashing knives.

In the same instant, Epona jerked her wrist and sliced a deep cut in his arm with a razor-sharp ring. He grabbed her hand and glanced at the ring. It held a tanzanite stone cut in the design of the Uffington horse. He disregarded the stabbing pain and pushed her away. Then he brought up his rifle and fired off four shots that struck the nearest women in the feet. All four went down with cries of pain and shock. The others hesitated but, hyped up with anger and fanaticism, began to press forward, making threatening motions with the daggers.

Giordino took Pitt's cue and began shooting the women in the feet, downing five of them.

'Stop!' Pitt shouted. 'Or we will shoot to kill.'

Those still unscathed paused. One of them, who was dressed in a silver gown, raised her dagger high over her head and let it drop with a clang onto the stone floor. Slowly the others followed suit until they all stood with empty hands.

'Tend to your wounded!'

Pitt finished releasing Summer, as Giordino covered the women and kept an eye out for guards. Finding that Epona had escaped during the melee, he cursed.

Summer was in no condition to walk on her own, so Pitt threw her over his shoulder and made his way to the throne, where he prised apart the rings holding Dirk's chains with the barrel of his weapon.

After pulling his gag off, Dirk gasped, 'Dad, where in God's name did you and Al come from?'

'We dropped from the sky,' said Pitt, happily embracing his son.

'You cut it close. Another few seconds and . . .' His voice trailed off.

'Now we have to figure out a way out of here.' Pitt stared down into Summer's glazed eyes. 'Is she all right?' he asked Dirk.

'Those druid witches drugged her to the gills.'

Pitt wished that he still had Epona, but there was no sign of her. He removed the satellite phone from the pack round his waist and dialled a number. Gunn's voice came over the receiver. 'Dirk?'

'What's your status?' asked Pitt. 'Are you airborne?'

'Yes, about three miles north of the island.' Then Gunn asked hesitantly. 'Dirk and Summer?'

'Safe and sound. Come and get us.'

Pitt switched off the phone and looked down at Summer, who was being brought back to consciousness by Giordino and Dirk as they walked her back and forth to get her circulation restored. By the time the helicopter reappeared, Pitt was confident there was no danger from Epona's security guards, so informed Gunn that the pilot could turn on his landing lights.

As the helicopter hovered briefly before descending, Pitt looked up into a cloudless sky carpeted with a million stars, wondering what destination Epona would head for. She would be a wanted woman now that it was known she had conducted criminal acts for her boss, Spectre. Every aspect of Odyssey's operations would be investigated. And what of Spectre? The questions spun in his mind. The enigma would have to be solved by others, he thought. His role, and that of Giordino, were finished. He turned his thoughts to more mundane matters, like his own future.

He looked up as Giordino came over and stood next to him. 'This may be a strange time to bring this up,' said his friend, 'but I've come to the conclusion during the past several days that I'm getting too old to be getting involved with Sandecker's crazy ventures. I'm tired of madcap exploits and wild escapades. My joints ache and my sore muscles take twice as long to heal.'

Pitt looked at him and smiled. 'So what's your point?'

'The admiral has a choice. I can either be put out to pasture to find a cushy job with an ocean engineering company or he can put me in charge of NUMA's underwater technical equipment department. Any job where I don't have to be maimed or shot at.'

Pitt turned and stared for a long moment over the restless black sea. Then he gazed at Dirk and Summer, as his son helped his daughter to board the aircraft. They were his future.

'You know,' he said finally. 'You've been reading my mind.'

AT NINE O'CLOCK in the morning, three days after he and his offspring had returned to his hangar, Pitt adjusted the tie that matched his one and only tailored black pinstripe suit. It was not often he wore the suit, but this was a very special day.

Spectre had been apprehended by Federal marshals when his pilot made the mistake of landing in San Juan, Puerto Rico, for refuelling during a flight to Montreal. He was served with a subpoena to testify before a congressional committee. The marshals took him into custody and transported him to Washington so there was no way he could flee to another country.

Epona, however, had escaped the net, and her whereabouts were still unknown. She was another matter the committee planned to question Spectre about.

Pitt walked over to his desk and picked up the knife he'd taken from Epona on Branwen Island. The hilt was encrusted with rubies and emeralds, the blade was thin and sharp. He slipped it into the inside breast pocket of his jacket.

He drove to the city and parked in a government-only parking area two blocks from the Capitol building. Once he had climbed the great staircase and entered under the dome, he followed Loren's directions to the meeting room where the investigation was being held. Not wishing to pass through the doors open to journalists and the public, he walked through the corridors until he came to a security guard standing beside a door reserved for the House of Representatives committee, their aides and lawyers.

Pitt gave the guard a slip of paper and asked him to give it to Congresswoman Loren Smith.

'I'm not supposed to do that,' the guard protested.

'It's extremely urgent,' said Pitt in an authoritative voice. 'I have a pivotal piece of evidence for her and the committee.'

Pitt displayed his NUMA credentials. The guard checked the ID, nodded, took the note and stepped into the committee room.

Ten minutes later, when there was a break in the questioning, Loren came through the door. 'What's this all about?' she asked.

'I have to get in the room.'

'You could have come through the public doors.'

'I have an item that will expose Spectre for what he is.'

'Give it to me, and I'll present it to the committee.'

He shook his head. 'No can do. I have to present it myself.'

'I can't let you do that. You're not on the list of witnesses.'

'Make an exception,' he persisted. 'Ask the chairman.'

She stared into the eyes she knew so well, looking for something but not finding it. 'Dirk, I simply can't do that. You've got to tell me what it is you're doing.'

The guard was standing nearby, listening to the conversation. The door, normally locked, was standing slightly ajar. Pitt took Loren by the shoulders, turned her round in one swift motion and pushed her into the guard. Before they could stop him, he was through the door and walking rapidly along the aisle between the seated representatives and their aides.

No one made any attempt to protest or to restrain him from coming down the short stairway to the witness and audience floor. He stopped in front of the table where Spectre was seated, surrounded by his high-priced attorneys.

Congressman Christopher Dunn of Montana pounded his gavel and called out, 'You, sir, are interrupting a very important investigation. I must ask you to leave immediately.'

'If you will indulge me, Congressman, I will set your investigation onto an entirely different track.'

Dunn motioned towards a guard who had chased Pitt into the room, Loren following closely behind. 'Remove him!'

Pitt pulled the knife from under his jacket. The guard stopped dead in his tracks.

'Indulge me,' Pitt repeated. 'Believe me, Congressman, it will be well worth your time to hear me out.'

'Who are you, sir?' Dunn demanded.

'My name is Dirk Pitt. I am the son of Senator George Pitt.'

Dunn mulled that over, then nodded at the guard. 'Hold on. I want to hear what Mr Pitt has to say.' He looked at Pitt. 'Drop that knife. Then I'll give you exactly one minute to state your case.'

'Thank you, Congressman.' Pitt laid the ornate knife on the table and moved until he was standing opposite Spectre, who sat in calm silence, dressed in his white suit and his customary turban, its sash draped around his lower face beneath dark sunglasses. 'Will you please stand up, Mr Spectre?'

One of Spectre's attorneys leaned over and spoke into the table's microphone. 'I must protest most vigorously, Congressman Dunn. This man has no business in this room. Mr Spectre is under no legal obligation to acknowledge him.'

'Is Spectre afraid?' said Pitt tauntingly. 'Is he a coward?'

Spectre was too arrogant to ignore Pitt's insults. He put his hand on his attorney's arm to restrain him and slowly rose from his chair.

Pitt smiled and gave a slight bow, as if in relaxed satisfaction.

Suddenly, before anybody realised what he was doing, he snatched up the knife and slashed the blade across Spectre's stomach, slicing through the white suit up to the hilt.

Shouts and screams reverberated throughout the room. The security guard lunged towards Pitt, who stepped aside, tripping the guard and sending him spilling onto the floor. Then Pitt plunged the knife blade into the table in front of Spectre and stood back, his expression one of extreme gratification.

Loren was one of the first to see that Spectre was not bleeding and that his white suit was unstained. Soon the hundred or more people who had come to their feet in shock noticed the same phenomenon.

His face pale, Congressman Dunn pounded his gavel. 'What is going on here?' he shouted.

But no one interfered as Pitt stepped round the table, flipped off Spectre's sunglasses, then pulled off his turban.

Everyone in the room gasped at seeing a great mass of red hair fall down around Spectre's shoulders.

Pitt approached Congressman Dunn. 'Sir, permit me to introduce Ms Epona Eliade, also known as Spectre, the founder of the Odyssey empire.'

'Is this true?' said a confused Dunn, coming to his feet. 'Is this woman really Spectre and not a disguised double?'

'She is the genuine article,' Pitt assured him. Then he turned to Epona. 'Strange as it sounds, I've missed you,' he said, in a voice heavy with sarcasm.

Her eyes flashed, her lips tightened, as her face filled with enough hate to launch a revolution. Then, slowly, very slowly, Epona began removing the knife-slashed white suit until she stood incredibly serene and beautiful in only a white form-fitting silk dress that fell from her shoulders and stopped just below her hips.

'You have won, Mr Pitt,' she said, huskily. 'Do you feel triumphant? Do you believe you have accomplished a miracle?'

Pitt shook his head. 'Triumphant, no. Gratified, yes. Your attempt to wreck the lives of millions of people was despicable. You could have given your great advance in fuel-cell technology to the world. Instead, you banded with a foreign nation to gain nothing more than wealth and power.'

'I might have changed the course of world history.'

'Few will grieve that you failed,' Pitt said coldly.

Only then did Pitt see a faint look of despair in her eyes.

Dunn pointed his gavel at two men seated at the back of the room. 'Will the Federal marshals please take this woman into custody?'

Epona's lawyers leapt to their feet, protesting that it was not in Dunn's power as a Congressman to arrest anyone. He glared at them. 'This person has committed fraud in front of this committee. She shall be held until such time as the attorney general's office has a chance to review her crimes and take proper legal action.'

As the marshals took Epona by the arm to lead her from the room, she stopped in front of Pitt and stared at him. 'My friends across the sea will never allow me to be prosecuted. We will cross paths again, Mr Pitt. The next time we meet, you will fall into my web, make no mistake.'

Pitt gave her a cool smile. 'Next time? I don't think so, Epona. You're not my type.'

The lips went taut with anger again, her skin paled and her eyes lost their lustre, as the marshals hustled her out of a side door.

Loren came down onto the witness floor and unashamedly hugged Pitt. 'You crazy fool. You might have been shot.'

'I figured this was the time and the place to expose the witch.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because, if I was wrong, I didn't want you involved.'

'You weren't sure?' she asked in surprise.

'I knew I was on solid ground, but at first I was only working on a hunch. When I came here today, I was still only sixty per cent certain. Once I came face to face with Spectre, it seemed obvious to me that the bulk of his weight wasn't distributed like that of a man weighing four hundred pounds.' Pitt held up his hand and displayed the scar on his arm. 'Then I recognised the ring on the index finger of his right hand—it was the one that Epona used to cut me on Branwen Island. That clinched it.'

Not caring what anybody in the committee room thought, Loren gave Pitt a light kiss on the cheek. 'I must get back to work. You've opened a can of worms that has changed the entire course of the investigation.'

Pitt began to move away, but turned and took Loren's hand. 'Will a week from Sunday work for you?'

'What's happening a week from Sunday?' she asked.

His lips spread in a devilish grin. 'That's the day of our wedding. I reserved the Washington Cathedral.'

He left the Congresswoman standing there, dazed, as he walked from the room.

thirteen

Loren insisted the wedding be held one month later. The ceremony took place at Washington National Cathedral, which sits on Mount Saint Alban, dominating the city skyline. Close to 500 friends and family attended the event. Loren's father and mother came from their ranch in Colorado, along with her two brothers and two sisters. Pitt's father, Senator George Pitt, and his mother, Barbara, were there. The NUMA gang turned out, as well as a large number of Washington's elite.

Afterwards, Pitt and Loren walked out into a beautiful afternoon with white clouds sailing majestically across the sky. Giordino was waiting in the driver's seat of the rose-coloured Marmon town car as Pitt opened the door for Loren and helped her inside. As they waved to the crowd, Giordino eased the gear shift into first and the big car pulled away from the cathedral steps. He drove through the gardens onto Wisconsin Avenue and turned towards the Potomac River and Pitt's hangar, where the reception would be held.

'Well, the evil deed is done,' Pitt said, laughing.

Loren punched him in the arm. 'Evil deed, is that what you call our beautiful wedding?'

He held her hand and looked at the ring he had slipped on her third finger. It held a three-carat ruby surrounded by small emeralds. 'First I'm confronted with two grown children I never knew I had, and now I have a wife to cherish.'

'I like the word "cherish",' she said softly, throwing her arms round his neck and kissing him forcibly on the mouth.

When he finally eased her back, he whispered, 'Let's wait for the honeymoon before we get carried away.'

She laughed and kissed him again. 'You never told me where you were taking me. You kept it a big surprise.'

'I chartered a small sailing yacht in Greece. We're going to sail round the Mediterranean.'

'Sounds wonderful.'

'Think a Colorado cowgirl can learn to raise sails and navigate?'

'Just watch me.'

They soon arrived at Pitt's hangar. Giordino used the remote to turn off the security alarms and open the main door. Then he drove

the Marmon into the hangar. Pitt and Loren stepped from the car and climbed the stairway to his apartment, where they changed into casual clothes for the reception.

Soon the guests began arriving and were served champagne and gourmet delicacies.

When Admiral Sandecker arrived, he asked to see Pitt alone. He was shown into one of the staterooms of the Pullman car, which Pitt used as an office. After Pitt had closed the door and they had sat down, Sandecker lit up a cigar. 'You know that Vice-President Holden is in poor health,' the admiral began, blowing a blue haze towards the panelled ceiling.

'I've heard rumours.'

'The situation is worse. He isn't expected to live out the month.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Pitt. 'My father has known him for thirty years. Holden's a good man.

Sandecker looked at Pitt to see his reaction. 'The President has asked me to be his running mate in the next election.'

Pitt's heavy black brows knitted together. 'The President is a shoo-in to win. Somehow, I can't picture you as Vice-President.'

Sandecker shrugged. 'It's an easier job than I have now.'

'Yes, but NUMA is your life.'

'I'm not getting younger, and after twenty-five years in the same job it's time for a change. Besides, I'm not the type to sit as a do-nothing vice-president. You've known me long enough to know I'll shake the government by the throat.'

Pitt laughed. 'I know you won't remain silent on certain issues.'

'Especially environmental issues pertaining to the seas,' Sandecker elaborated. 'When you think about it, I can do more good from the White House than I can in my fancy office across the river.'

'Who takes over as head of NUMA?' asked Pitt. 'Rudi Gunn?'

Sandecker shook his head. 'No, Rudi doesn't want the job. He feels more comfortable as second-in-command.'

'Then who do you plan to tap?'

A sly smile spread over Sandecker's lips. 'You,' he replied briefly.

'Me? You can't be serious.'

'I can't think of a more qualified person to take the reins.'

Pitt came to his feet and paced the room. 'No, no, I'm not an administrator.'

'Gunn and his team can handle the day-to-day business,' explained Sandecker. 'With your background and achievements, you'd be the perfect choice to act as NUMA's chief spokesman.'

The enormity of the decision was not lost on Pitt. 'I've got to think about this.'

Sandecker stood and walked to the door. 'Think about it during your honeymoon. We'll discuss it when you and Loren return.'

'I've got to discuss it with her first, now that we're married.'

'We've already talked. She's in favour.'

Pitt fixed the admiral with an iron stare. 'You old devil.'

'Yes,' said Sandecker cheerfully, 'I am that.'

Pitt returned to the reception and mingled with the guests, posing for pictures with Loren and their parents. He was talking with his mother when Dirk came up and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Dad, there's a man at the door who wants to see you.'

Pitt excused himself and walked through the rows of old cars and the throng of friends and guests. When he reached the door, he found an older man, around seventy, with white hair and beard. He stood almost the same height as Pitt, and though his eyes were not as green, they had a similar twinkle.

'Can I help you?' asked Pitt.

'Yes, I contacted you some time ago about coming by and viewing your car collection. We parked next to each other at a concourse a few years ago.'

'Of course, I displayed my Stutz and you had a Hispano-Suiza.'

'Yes, that's right.' The man looked behind Pitt at the festivities. 'It seems I've come at a bad time.'

'No, no,' said Pitt in a happy mood. 'It's my wedding day. You're welcome to join the party.'

'That's very gracious of you.'

'I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name.'

The old man looked at him and smiled. 'Cussler, Clive Cussler.'

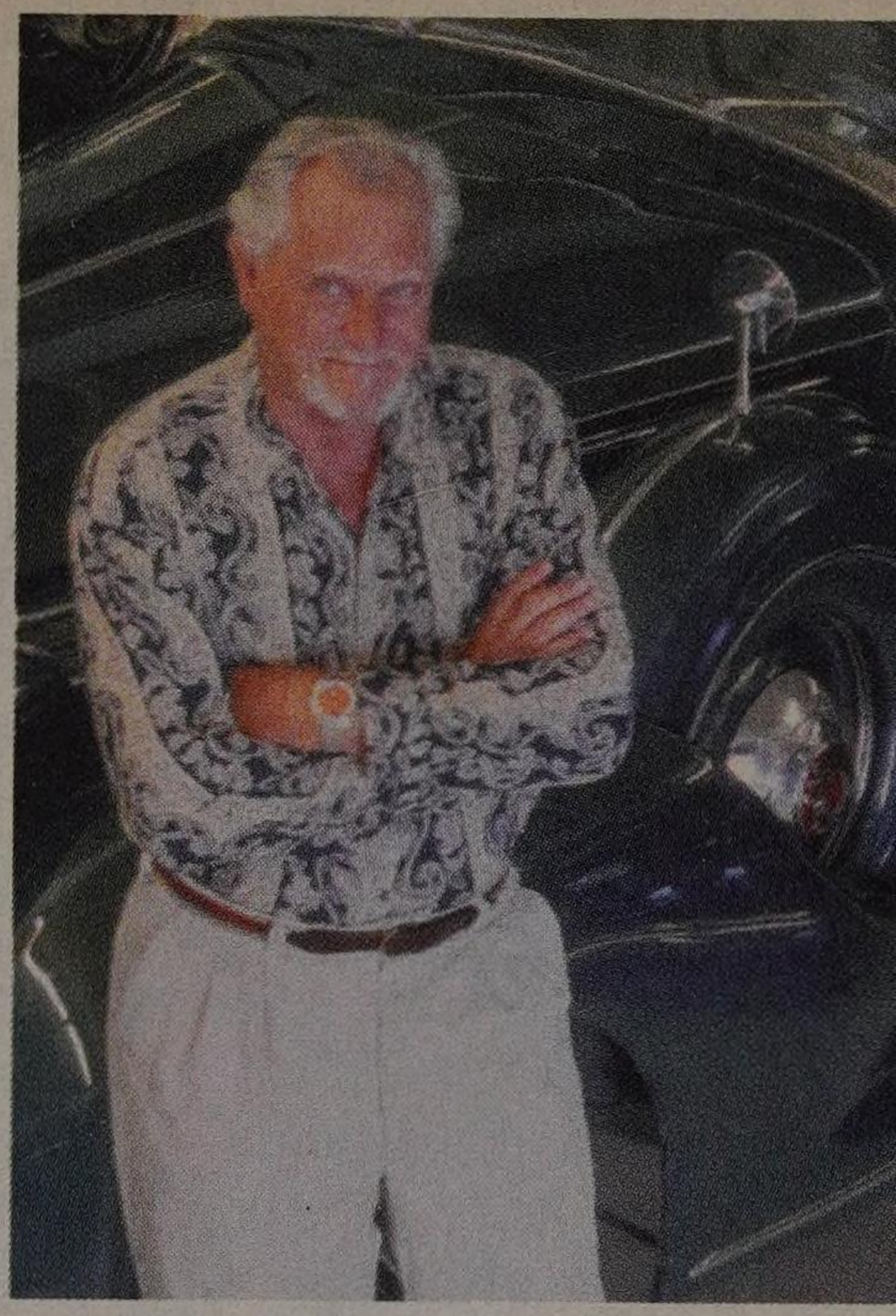
Pitt studied Cussler pensively for a long moment. 'Strange,' he said in a vague tone, 'I get the feeling I've known you for a long time.'

'Perhaps in another dimension.'

Pitt put his arm round Cussler's shoulders. 'Come on in, Clive, before my guests drink up all the champagne.'

Together, they stepped into the hangar and closed the door.

CLIVE CUSSLER



For more than thirty years, Clive Cussler has been creating fantastic tales of adventure featuring the swashbuckling, fearless Dirk Pitt, certain that there's a piece of his hero in every man who reads and enjoys his books. And he is more than happy to admit that he feels a close affinity to his famous character, who he named Dirk after his eldest son. 'Why wouldn't I want to be like him? We both like a challenge and searching for something that's lost. When we started out together we were both thirty-six years old. He's about forty-five now; I'm seventy-one. He's also twenty pounds lighter than me and an inch taller, since I've shrunk!'

Cussler's reputation as a best-selling author and world authority on underwater exploration just keeps on growing. In 1979 he founded the National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA), a non-profit organisation committed to preserving maritime and naval history. Named after the agency in Cussler's novels, NUMA has been responsible for the discovery of more than sixty historically significant underwater wreck sites. So what is it about the deep-sea world that so fascinates Cussler? 'It's the final unknown on our own planet,' he says. 'We've mapped every square inch of the earth and moon, but only two per cent of the sea floor. I've always enjoyed diving and my passion, when I'm not writing, is looking for shipwrecks.'

Another passion the author shares with Pitt is his collection of classic cars. He now has eighty-seven much-prized examples and, when pressed to name a favourite, 'the Duesenberg and the Talbot Lago' is as selective as he can be. Always on the lookout for a new challenge, however, Cussler has started to track down antiques of a different kind. 'I think I'm through with my car collection. Now I'm enjoying looking for small, rare firearms.'

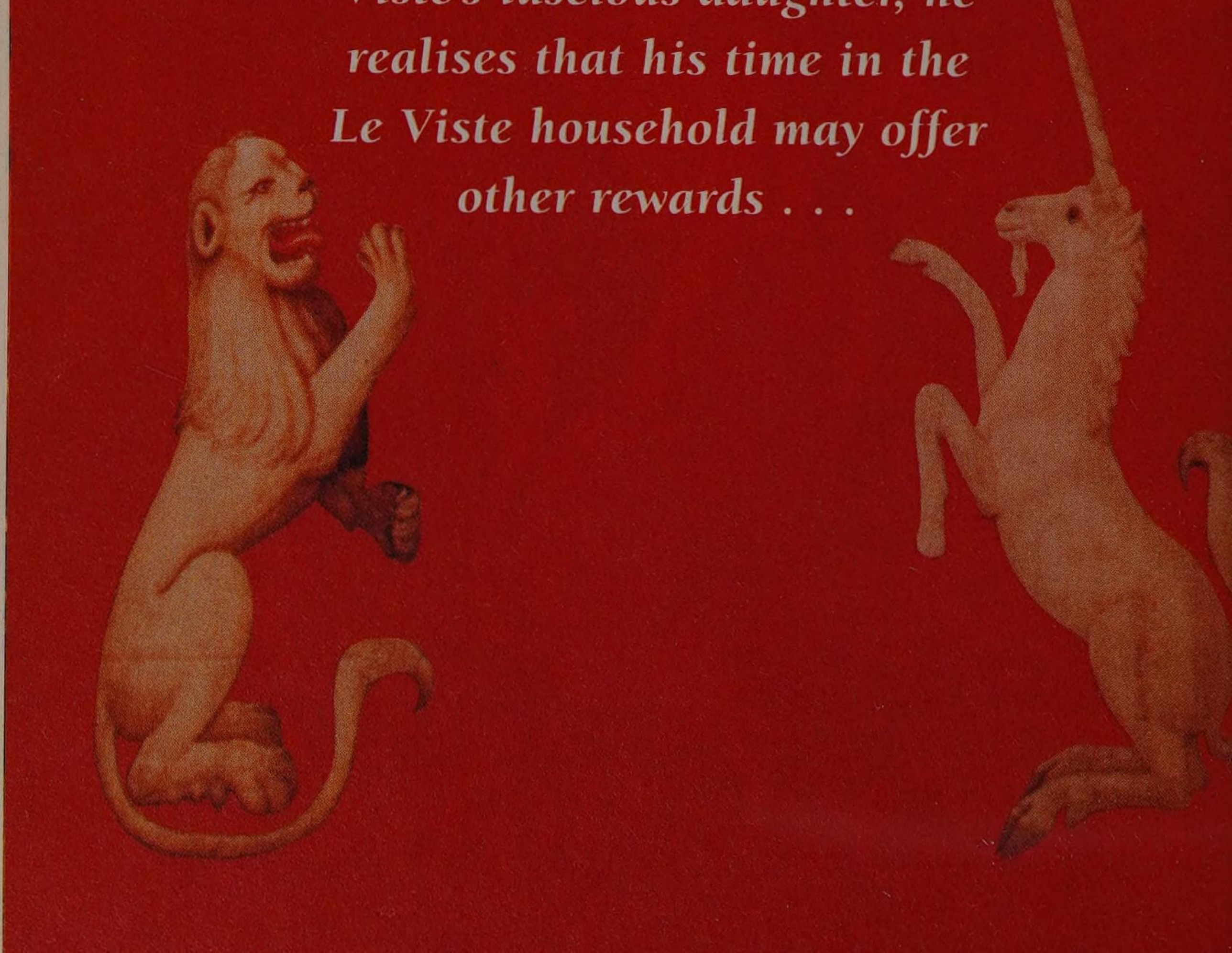
Trojan Odyssey is Cussler's twentieth novel—a remarkable achievement. He says he gets his ideas by reading widely, often finding inspiration in titbits of scientific and historical fact. The plot of *Trojan Odyssey*, for example, grew out of the fascinating theories in *Where Troy Once Stood* by Iman Wilkens. 'I'm not a literary writer,' he emphasises. 'But I've always had a good imagination. And I figure it's my job to entertain the reader.'

The Lady and the Unicorn

Tracy Chevalier

Jean Le Viste, a fifteenth-century nobleman favoured by the French King, hires famed miniaturist Nicolas des Innocents to design six large tapestries for his Saint-Germain-des-Prés home. Nicolas is daunted by the sheer scale of the work, but knows he can't refuse such a prestigious commission.

And when he sets eyes on Le Viste's luscious daughter, he realises that his time in the Le Viste household may offer other rewards . . .



PARIS

Lent—Eastertide 1490

Nicolas des Innocents

The messenger said I was to come at once. That's how Jean Le Viste is—he expects everyone to do what he says immediately. And I did, stopping just briefly to clean my brushes. Only the King says no to Jean Le Viste, and I am certainly no king.

On the other hand, how many times have I rushed across the Seine to the rue du Four, only to come back again with no commission? It's not that Jean Le Viste is a fickle man—on the contrary, he is as sober and hard as his beloved Louis XI once was. Humourless too. I never jest with him. It's a relief to escape his house to the nearest tavern for a drink and a laugh and a grope to restore my spirits.

He knows what he wants. But sometimes when I come to discuss yet another coat of arms to decorate the chimney, or to paint on his wife's carriage door—people say the Le Viste arms are as common as horse dung—he'll stop suddenly, shake his head and say with a frown, 'This is not needed. I should not be thinking about such commonplace matters. Go.' And I do, feeling guilty, as if I am to blame.

I'd been to the rue du Four house half a dozen times before. It is not a place that impresses. It is the sort of house a family that has bought its way into the Court would live in—grand enough but poorly placed. Jean Le Viste probably thinks he has done well to be given such a place to live, while the Court laughs behind his back. He should be living close to the King and Notre Dame, not outside the city walls in the swampy fields around Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

When I arrived the steward took me to the Grande Salle, where the

Le Vistes receive visitors. I had never been there. It was a long room with a large hearth at the opposite end from the door and an oak table down the centre. Apart from a coat of arms that hung on the chimney breast and another painted over the door, it was unadorned, though the ceiling was panelled with handsome carved wood.

'Wait here for my master,' the steward said, glaring at me. In this house people either respected artists or showed their contempt.

I turned my back on him and gazed out of a narrow window where there was a clear view of the towers of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

The door opened behind me and I turned, prepared to bow. It was only a servant girl, who smirked as she saw me half-bent. I straightened and watched as she moved across the room, banging a pail against her leg. She knelt and began to clear the fireplace of ashes.

Was she the one? I tried to remember—it had been dark that night behind the stables. She was fatter than I recalled, and sullen with her heavy brow, but her face was sweet enough. It was worth a word.

'Stay a moment,' I said when she had stood up clumsily and made her way to the door. 'Sit and rest your feet. I'll tell you a story.'

The girl stopped with a jolt. 'You mean the story of the unicorn?'

She was the one. I opened my mouth to answer, but the girl jumped in before me. 'Does the story go on to say that the woman grows big with child and may lose her place? Is that what happens?'

So that was why she was fat. I turned back to the window. 'You should have taken more care.'

'I shouldn't have listened to you, is what I should have done.'

'Out you go now, there's a good girl. Here.' I dug a few coins out of my pocket and threw them onto the table. 'To help with the baby.'

The girl stepped across the room and spat in my face. By the time I'd wiped the spittle from my eyes she was gone. So were the coins.

Jean Le Viste came in soon after, followed by Léon Le Vieux. Most patrons use a merchant like Léon to act as middleman, haggling over terms, drawing up contracts. Léon is much favoured by the Le Vistes.

Léon was looking at me, smiling through his beard. I turned to Jean Le Viste. '*Bonjour*, Monseigneur. You wished to see me.' I bowed so low my head throbbed. It never hurt to bow low.

Jean Le Viste's eyes are like knife blades. They flicked around the room now, then rested on the window over my shoulder. 'I want to discuss a commission with you, Nicolas des Innocents,' he said, pulling at the sleeves of his robe, which was trimmed with rabbit fur and dyed the deep red lawyers wear. 'For this room.'

'What did you have in mind, Monseigneur?'

'Tapestries. I want tapestries to cover all of the walls.'

I looked around the room once again, more carefully this time. The Grande Salle was at least ten paces long and five wide, with three windows cut into one of the long walls. Tapestries to line the room could take a weaver several years.

'What would you have as the subject, Monseigneur?' I had designed one tapestry for Jean Le Viste—a coat of arms, of course.

Jean Le Viste folded his arms. 'Last year I was made President of the Cour des Aides. I want to celebrate the achievement with a set of tapestries. It is essential that the family coat of arms be displayed.'

'Of course, Monseigneur.'

Then Jean Le Viste surprised me. 'But not on its own. No, I want it to be part of a larger scene, to reflect my place at the heart of the Court—the Battle of Nancy.'

I kept my face thoughtful. I even smiled a little. But in truth I knew little of battles, and nothing of this one at Nancy, of who had been there, who had been killed and who had won. Horses, I thought. I would need to paint at least twenty horses to cover these walls, tangled with men's arms and legs and armour. I wondered then what had made Jean Le Viste—or Léon, more likely—choose me for this work. My reputation at the Court is as a miniaturist, painter of tiny portraits of ladies that they give men to carry. Praised for their delicacy, the miniatures are much in demand. I paint shields and ladies' carriage doors for drink money, but my true skill is in making a face the size of my thumb. The thought of painting twenty huge horses . . . I began to sweat, though the room was chilly.

I bowed low again. 'Monseigneur, I am most honoured and grateful to be asked to design such a glorious work. You may have no fear that I'll put my heart and blood into these tapestries.'

Jean Le Viste nodded, as if such grovelling were his due. 'I'll leave you here with Léon to discuss details,' he said as he turned to go. 'I will expect to see preliminary drawings just before Easter—by Maundy Thursday, with paintings by the Ascension.'

When we were alone, Léon Le Vieux chuckled. 'What a fool you are.'

With Léon it's best to come straight to the point and ignore his gibes. 'My fee is ten *livres tournois*—four now, three when I finish the drawings, and three when the paintings are done.'

'Five *livres parisis*,' he responded quickly. 'Half when you finish the drawings, the rest when you deliver the paintings.'

'Absolutely not. I can't work with no pay at the start. And my terms are in *livres tournois*.' Paris *livres* are worth less.

'We are in Paris. Shouldn't we use *livres parisis*? That is what I prefer.'

'Eight *livres tournois*, with three now, then three and two.'

'Seven. I will give you two tomorrow, then two and three at the end.'

I changed the subject. It is always best to let the merchant wait a little. 'Where will the tapestries be made?'

'North. Probably Brussels. They do the best work there.'

North? I shuddered. I once had business in Tournai and hated the flat light and suspicious people so much I vowed never to go north again.

'*Alors*, what do you know about the battle at Nancy?' Léon asked.

'What does it matter? All battles are the same, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'That's like saying that all women are the same.'

I smiled. 'I repeat: all battles are the same.'

Léon shook his head. 'I pity your wife one day.' He took out some papers from his pocket and laid them on the table. 'I've already discussed the contents of the tapestries with Monseigneur and done some measuring. Here.' He pointed to six rectangles he had roughly sketched. 'There's space for two long ones here and here, and four smaller. Here is the sequence of the battle.' He explained the battle carefully, suggesting scenes for each of the tapestries—the grouping of the two camps, the initial strike, two scenes of battle chaos, then the death of Charles the Bold and the triumphant procession of the Swiss. Though I listened and made sketches of my own on the paper, part of me stood apart and wondered at what I was agreeing to do.

'Once you've made the paintings,' Léon specified, 'your work is done. I'll take them north to the weaver, and his cartoonist will enlarge them to use for the weaving.'

I should have been pleased that I wouldn't have to paint the horses large. Instead, however, I became protective of my work. 'How do I know that this cartoonist won't make a mess of my designs?'

'He won't change what Jean Le Viste has decided on, he'll only make changes that will help the design. *Tiens*, there's one thing I forgot to mention. You'll need to be sure there are Le Viste coats of arms throughout the tapestries. Monseigneur will insist on that.'

'Did Monseigneur actually fight with the Swiss?'

Léon laughed. 'Undoubtedly Jean Le Viste was on the other side of France during the Battle of Nancy, working for the King. That doesn't matter. Just put his coat of arms on flags and shields that others carry. Now, I'll leave you to your measurements. Bring the drawings to me by Palm Sunday—if I want changes you'll need time to get them done before Monseigneur sees them.'

I couldn't resist a last question. 'Why did you choose me?'

Léon gathered his plain brown robe about him—no fur trim for him. 'I didn't. If it were my choice I would have someone who has done more tapestries, or go direct to the weaver. It's cheaper and they are good at the designs.' Léon was always frank.

'Why did Jean Le Viste choose me, then?'

'You'll find out soon enough. *Alors*, come to me tomorrow and I'll have the papers for you to sign, and the money.'

'I haven't agreed to the terms yet.'

'Oh, I think you have. There are some commissions an artist doesn't say no to. This is one of them.' He gave me a look as he left.

He was right. I had been talking as if I were going to do them. Still, the terms were not bad. In fact, Léon had not haggled very hard. I wondered if his terms were still in Paris *livres* after all.

I turned my eyes to the walls I was to dress so sumptuously. I was wondering where I could find a long pole to use for measuring the height of the room when I heard humming behind me and turned round. A girl stood in the entrance watching me. A lovely girl—she had pale skin, a high forehead, a long nose, hair the colour of honey, clear eyes. I'd not seen such a girl before. For a moment I couldn't say anything. 'Hello, beauty,' I managed at last.

The girl laughed. She was wearing a simple blue dress, with a tight bodice, a square neck and narrow sleeves. It was cut well and the wool was fine, but it was not ornate. She wore a plain scarf too, her long hair falling almost to her waist. She was clearly too fine to be a maid. Perhaps a lady in waiting?

'The mistress of the house wishes to see you,' she said, then turned and ran away, still laughing.

I didn't move. I've learned from experience that dogs, falcons and ladies come back to you if you stay where you are. After a moment she reappeared at the door. 'Are you coming?' She was still smiling.

'I will, beauty, if you will walk with me and not hurry ahead as if I were a dragon you had to flee.'

The girl laughed. 'Come,' she beckoned. I had to step quickly to keep up with her as she ran from room to room. Up close she smelt of something sweet and spicy, underlined with sweat. Her mouth moved as if she were chewing something.

'What do you have in your mouth, beauty?'

'Toothache.' The girl stuck out her tongue; on its pink tip lay a clove. The sight of her tongue made me hard. I wanted to plough her.

'Ah, that must hurt. Now, why does your mistress want to see me?'

The girl looked at me, amused. 'I expect she'll tell you herself.'

I slowed down. 'Why rush? She won't mind, will she, if you and I have a little chat along the way?'

'What do you want to talk about?' She turned up a round staircase.

I leapt onto the stair in front of her to stop her from climbing. 'What sorts of animals do you like?'

'Animals?'

'I don't want you to think of me as a dragon. I'd rather you thought of me as something else. Something you prefer.'

The girl thought. 'A parakeet, perhaps. I do like parakeets. I have four.' She ran round me to stand on the stairs above me.

'Not a parakeet,' I said. 'Surely you don't think of me as a squawker and an imitator.'

'My parakeets make no noise. But anyway, you are an artist, *n'est-ce pas*? Isn't that what you do—imitate life?'

'I make things more beautiful than they are—though there are some things, my girl, that cannot be improved upon with paint.' I stepped round her and stood three steps above. I wanted to see if she would come to me.

She did. Her eyes remained clear and wide, but her mouth was twisted into a knowing smile. I will have you, I thought. I will.

She stepped round me and did not stop this time. 'Come—my mistress waits. We must not keep her.'

'I know which animal I want to be,' I panted, running after her.

'What's that?'

'A unicorn. Do you know of the unicorn?'

The girl snorted. She'd reached the top of the stairs and was opening the door to another room. 'I know it likes to lay its head in maidens' laps. Is that what you like to do?'

'Ah, don't think of me so coarsely. The unicorn does something far greater than that. His horn has a special power, you see.'

The girl slowed down to look at me. 'What does it do?'

'If a well is poisoned—'

'There's a well!' The girl stopped and pointed out of a window to the courtyard. A younger girl was leaning over the edge of a well and looking down into it, the sun bathing her hair in gold light.

'Jeanne always does that,' the girl said. 'She likes to look at her reflection.' As we watched the girl spat into the well.

'If your well there was poisoned, beauty, or sullied such as Jeanne has just done, a unicorn could come along and dip his horn into it and it would become pure again. What do you think of that?'

'What do you want me to think of it?'

'I want you to think of me as your unicorn. There are times when you're sullied, yes, even you, beauty. Every woman is. That is Eve's punishment. But you can be made pure again, if you will only let me tend to you. Every month you will go back to Eden.'

The girl laughed, raucously this time. She was ready. I reached out to squeeze her and seal our exchange.

'Claude? Is that you? What's taken you so long?' A door across from us had opened and a woman stood staring at us, her arms folded across her chest. I dropped my hand.

'*Pardon*, Maman. Here he is.' Claude gestured at me. I bowed.

Claude ran from the room, banging the door behind her.

I shuddered. I had just tried to seduce Jean Le Viste's daughter.

In the times I'd been to the house on the rue du Four I had only ever seen the three Le Viste girls from afar. Of course the girl by the well was one of them too. If I'd been paying attention I would have understood when I saw her hair that she and Claude were sisters. Then I would have guessed who they were. But I had not been thinking about who she was, I'd been thinking about how to bed her.

Claude had only to repeat to her father what I'd said and I would be thrown out, the commission taken from me. And I would never see her again. I wanted her more than ever, and not just for bedding. I wanted to lie with her at my side and talk to her, touch that mouth and make her laugh.

The woman in the doorway was looking at me as if she'd guessed all that was going through my head. She said nothing, though, but pushed the door open and walked back through the doorway. I followed.

I had painted miniatures in many ladies' chambers. This one was not so different. There was a bed made of chestnut and hung with curtains of blue and yellow silk. There were oak chairs in a semicircle, padded with embroidered cushions. An open window framed a view of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Gathered in the corner were her ladies in waiting, working on embroidery.

Geneviève de Nanterre—wife of Jean Le Viste and mistress of the house—sat down by the window. She had clearly once been as beautiful as her daughter. She was still a handsome woman, with a wide forehead and a delicate chin, but fifteen years as Jean Le Viste's wife had straightened the curves, set the jaw, lined the brow. Her eyes were dark currants to Claude's clear quinces.

'You have just been with my husband in the Grande Salle,' she said. 'Discussing tapestries.'

'Yes, Madame.'

'I suppose he wants a battle.'

'Yes, Madame. The Battle of Nancy.'

'Have you ever been in a battle, Nicolas des Innocents?'

'No, Madame.'

'I want you to think for a moment that you are a soldier who has fought in the Battle of Nancy. You lost your arm in that battle. You are sitting in the Grande Salle as a guest of my husband and myself.'

Geneviève de Nanterre crossed her arms and turned her head to one side. 'As you eat you look at the tapestries of the battle that has cost you your arm. You recognise Charles the Bold being slaughtered, you see the blood spurting from his wounds. Everywhere you see Le Viste banners. But where is Jean Le Viste?'

I tried to remember what Léon had said. 'Monseigneur is at the King's side, Madame.'

'Yes. During the battle my husband and the King were snug at Court in Paris, far from Nancy. Now, as this soldier, how would you feel, knowing that Jean Le Viste was never at the Battle of Nancy, yet seeing his banners everywhere in the tapestries?'

'I would think that he is an important man to be at the King's side, Madame. His counsel is more important than his skills in battle.'

'Ah, that is very diplomatic of you, Nicolas. But I'm afraid that is not the right answer. I want you to think carefully and tell me in truth what such a soldier would think.'

'He would be offended, Madame.'

Geneviève de Nanterre nodded. 'Yes. There it is.'

'But that's no reason—'

'*De plus*, I don't want my daughters to look at bloody carnage while entertaining at a feast.'

'I can't go against Monseigneur's wishes, Madame.'

Geneviève de Nanterre sat back in her chair. 'Tell me, Nicolas, do you know who chose you to design these tapestries?'

'No, Madame.'

'I did.'

I stared at her. 'Why, Madame?'

'I've seen the miniatures you do of ladies in the Court. There is something about them that you capture which pleases me.'

'What is that, Madame?'

'Their spiritual nature.'

I bowed, surprised. 'Thank you, Madame.' There was a pause. I shifted from one foot to the other. 'What . . . what would you have me paint instead of a battle, Madame?'

Geneviève de Nanterre's eyes gleamed. 'A lady and a unicorn.'

I froze. She must have heard me with Claude or she wouldn't have suggested it. If she did know, she could tell Jean Le Viste about my attempt to seduce their daughter and the commission would be lost. Not only that—with a word Geneviève de Nanterre could ruin my reputation at Court and I would never paint another miniature.

I had no choice but to try to sweeten her. 'Are you fond of unicorns, Madame?'

One of the ladies in waiting giggled. Geneviève de Nanterre frowned and the girl stopped. 'I've never seen one, so how would I know? No, it's Claude I am thinking of. She likes them, and it is she as the eldest child who will inherit the tapestries one day.'

I'd heard talk of the family *sans* heir, of how it must rankle Jean Le Viste not to have a son to pass on his beloved coat of arms to. The blame for having three daughters must lie heavily upon his wife. I looked at her a little more kindly.

'The Lady might seduce the unicorn. Each tapestry could be a scene of her in the woods, tempting him with music and food and flowers, and at the end he lays his head in her lap. That is a popular story.'

'Perhaps. Of course Claude would like that. She is a girl at the beginning of her life. Yes, the virgin taming the unicorn might be the thing. Though it may pain me as much to sit among that as to be amidst a battle scene.' She said the last words almost to herself.

'Why, Madame?'

'I will be surrounded by seduction, youth, love. What is all that to me?' She tried to sound dismissive, but she seemed wistful.

She doesn't share her husband's bed, I thought. She has had her daughters and done her part. Not well either—no sons. Now she is shut off from him and there is nothing left for her. At that moment I felt sorry for her. Something in these tapestries will be hers, I thought in a rush. They will not only be about a seduction, but about something else as well, not just a virgin but a woman who would be a virgin again, so that the tapestries are about the whole of a woman's life, its beginning and its end. That was what I would do.

A bell rang in the tower of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

'Sext, Madame,' said one of the ladies.

'I will go to that,' Geneviève de Nanterre said. She rose from her chair and I knew I would be dismissed.

'*Pardon*, Madame, but will Monseigneur agree to unicorns rather than battles?'

'You will have to convince him.'

'But . . . surely you should tell him yourself, Madame. After all, you were able to get him to agree to have me do the designs.'

'Ah, that was easy. One artist or another means little to him, as long as they are accepted at Court. But the subject of the commission is between him and you. I am meant to have nothing to do with it.'

I frowned at the floor. I'd been caught in a web woven between Jean Le Viste and his wife and daughter, and I didn't know how to escape. These tapestries will bring me to grief, I thought.

'I have a cunning idea, Madame.' The lady in waiting who spoke was the plainest but had lively eyes. 'In fact, it's a punning idea. You know how Monseigneur likes puns.'

'So he does,' Geneviève de Nanterre agreed.

'*Visté* means speed. The unicorn is *visté*, *n'est-ce pas*? No animal runs faster. So when we see a unicorn we think of Viste.'

'Béatrice, you're so clever. If your idea works you may marry this Nicolas des Innocents. I will give you my blessing.'

I jerked my head. Béatrice laughed, and all the women joined her. I smiled politely. I had no idea if Geneviève de Nanterre was joking.

Still laughing, Geneviève de Nanterre led her ladies out, leaving me alone. I decided to finish measuring the Grande Salle. I found a pole in the stables and was carrying it across the courtyard when Jean Le Viste himself came striding out of the house. I called out, 'Monseigneur! A moment, please!' If I didn't say something now I might never get another chance alone with him.

Jean Le Viste grunted and kept walking. I ran to catch up with him.

'I am concerned, Monseigneur,' I said hastily. 'Concerned that you should have hung on your walls what others would expect from such a prominent member of Court.'

'What's your point? I am busy here.'

'I have seen designs for a number of tapestries this past year commissioned by noble families from my fellow artists. All of them have one thing in common: a *millefleur* background.' This much was true. Backgrounds of a dense pattern of flowers were popular now.

'Flowers?' Jean Le Viste repeated. 'There are no flowers in battles.'

'No, Monseigneur. They have not been weaving battles. Several of my colleagues have designed scenes with . . . with unicorns in them, Monseigneur.' I was making up words as I went along.

'Unicorns?'

'Yes, Monseigneur. They are *à la mode* now. And it did occur to me that a unicorn might be appropriate for your family.' I described Béatrice's pun.

Jean Le Viste didn't change expression, but he nodded, and that was enough. 'Do you know what to have this unicorn do?'

'Yes, Monseigneur, I do.'

'All right, then. Tell Léon. And bring me the drawings before Easter.' Jean Le Viste turned to cross the courtyard.

I bowed to his back. It hadn't been as hard to convince him as I'd thought. I had been right that Jean Le Viste would want what he thought everyone else had.

That night I drank at Le Coq d'Or to celebrate the commission, and afterwards slept poorly. I dreamt of unicorns and ladies surrounded by flowers, a girl chewing on a clove, another gazing at herself in a well, a lady holding jewels by a small casket, a girl feeding a falcon. It was all in a jumble that I could not set straight. It was not a nightmare, though, but a longing. When I woke the next morning, my head was clear and I was ready to make the dreams real.

Claude Le Viste

Maman asked Papa about the tapestries after Mass on Easter Sunday, and that was when I heard the artist was coming back. Until now Papa has said little about the tapestries. I think he regrets changing the battle into a unicorn—Papa loves his battles and his King. He left us abruptly, saying he had to speak to the steward.

Thank heaven for Béatrice! She has told me everything: the switch from battle to unicorn, her own clever pun on *Viste*, and best of all, Nicolas's name. Soon I will have her for my own lady in waiting. Maman can spare her, and she would much rather be with me; she will have much more fun.

Maman is so tedious these days. All she wants to do is to pray. I seem to irritate her now, though I don't know what bothers her so. She irritates me too. She's always telling me I'm laughing too much or walking too fast, or that my dress is dusty or my headdress is not straight. She treats me like a girl yet expects me to be a woman too.

Many other girls of fourteen are already betrothed. When I ask, Maman tells me I'm disrespectful and must wait for Papa to decide when and what man I shall marry. I grow so frustrated. If I am to be a woman, where is my man?

Yesterday I tried to listen to Maman's confession at Saint-Germain-des-Prés to find out if she felt bad about being so spiteful to me. I hid

behind a pillar near the pew where she sat with the priest but her voice was so low that I had to creep quite close. All I heard was '*C'est mon seul désir*' before one of the priests chased me away. '*Mon seul désir*,' I murmured to myself. My one desire. The phrase is so bewitching that I repeat it to myself all day long.

Once I was sure that Nicolas would be coming to the rue du Four, I knew I had to see him. *C'est mon seul désir*. I've thought about him every hour of every day since I met him. Of course I've said nothing to anyone, except for Béatrice, who was not very kind about him. 'He's not worthy of you,' she said. 'He's just an artist, and not trustworthy at that. You should be thinking of lords instead.'

'If he were untrustworthy, my father would never have hired him,' I retorted. 'Oncle Léon wouldn't have allowed it.' Léon is not really my uncle, but an old merchant who looks after my father's business. He treats me like a niece. Until recently he chucked me under the chin and brought me sweetmeats, but now he tells me to stand straight and comb my hair.

I went straight to the steward to find out exactly when Nicolas was coming. 'Thursday at Sext,' he muttered. 'Him and Léon too.'

Thursday I was meant to go with Maman and my sisters to grandmother's at Nanterre for the night, but I pretended to have a bellyache so that I could stay at home.

Maman had Béatrice stay back to look after me, and she and my sisters finally left for Nanterre. I then sent Béatrice out to buy some honeyed orange peel I have a liking for, saying it would settle my stomach. I insisted that she go all the way to a stall near Notre Dame for it. She rolled her eyes at me but she went.

When she was gone I straightened my clothes and headdress, and ran to my father's private chamber. The door was open and I peeked in. Only Marie-Céleste was there, crouching at the hearth to light the fire. When I was younger, Marie-Céleste used to take me and Jeanne and Petite Geneviève down to the river and sing us bawdy songs while she washed clothes. I wanted to tell her now about Nicolas des Innocents, about where I wanted his hands to go and what I would do with my tongue. After all, it had been her songs and stories that taught me about such things. But something stopped me. She had been my friend when I was a girl, but now I am growing up and it was not right to speak of such things with her.

'Why are you lighting the fire, Marie-Céleste?' I asked instead.

'Visitors coming, Mademoiselle,' she answered. 'For your father.'

The wood was beginning to smoke, with flames licking here and

there. Marie-Céleste grabbed a chair and hauled herself to her feet with a grunt. Her face looked fatter than before. In fact . . . I gazed at her body in growing horror. 'Marie-Céleste, are you with child?'

The girl hung her head.

'You silly thing!' I scolded. 'Who is he?'

Marie-Céleste waved her hand as if batting away the question.

'*Alors*, will he marry you?'

Marie-Céleste scowled. 'No.'

'Maman will be furious. Has she seen you?'

'I keep away from her, Mademoiselle.'

'She'll find out soon enough. You'll have to go back to your family. *Attends*, you must tell Maman something. I know—tell her your mother's ill and you must tend to her. Then you can come back after the baby's born.'

'Can't go to the mistress looking like this, Mademoiselle. She'll know straight away what's wrong.'

'I'll tell her, then, when she comes back from Nanterre.' I did feel sorry for Marie-Céleste and wanted to help her.

Marie-Céleste brightened. 'Oh, thank you, Mademoiselle. That is good of you!'

'You'd best be off as soon as you can.'

'Thank you, Mademoiselle. Thank you.' She turned to go, then said, 'If it's a girl I'll name her after you.'

'That would be nice. If it's a boy will you name it after the father?'

Marie-Céleste narrowed her eyes. 'Never,' she sneered. 'He don't want nothing to do with it, so I don't want nothing to do with him!'

After she left I had a look round Papa's chamber. There are two tables in the room—one that Papa writes at, and a bigger one where he spreads maps and papers for meetings. Usually that table is bare, but today some large sheets of paper had been left there. I looked down at the top one and stepped back in surprise. It was a drawing, and it was of me. I was standing between a lion and a unicorn, holding a parakeet on my gloved finger. I was glancing sideways at the unicorn and smiling as if I were thinking of a secret.

I gazed at the drawing for a long time. I couldn't take my eyes from it or move it to see the drawings underneath. He had drawn me. He was thinking of me as I was of him. *Mon seul désir*.

Then I heard voices in the hall. The door opened and all I could think to do was drop to the floor and scramble under the table. I sat with my arms wrapped round my knees, praying that I couldn't be seen.

Two men entered and came straight over to the table. One wore the

long brown robes of a merchant, and must be Oncle Léon. The other wore a grey tunic to his knees and dark blue hose. His calves were shapely, and I knew even before he spoke that it was Nicolas.

'Monseigneur will be along in a moment,' Oncle Léon said. 'Let us consider a few things while we wait.' I could hear paper rustling.

'Did he like the designs?' Nicolas asked. 'Was he full of praise?' The sound of his confident voice went straight to my maidenhead, as if he had touched me there.

Leon chuckled. 'You are getting ahead of yourself, Nicolas. In this business you wait for the patron to give his opinion. *Alors*, you must prepare yourself to meet Monseigneur. The first thing you must understand is that he hasn't looked at the drawings.'

'But he's had them for a week!'

'Yes, and he will say he has studied them carefully, but he hasn't looked at them. Monseigneur Le Viste is very busy now. He does not consider something until he needs to. Then he makes a quick decision and expects to be obeyed without question.'

Nicolas snorted. 'This is how a nobleman like him does business for such an important commission? I wonder if a man of true noble blood would work this way.'

Oncle Léon lowered his voice. 'Jean Le Viste is only too aware of such opinions of him.' I could hear the frown in his voice. 'He uses hard work and loyalty to his King to compensate for the lack of respect even artists like you who work for him have.'

'My respect is not so slight that I am not willing to work for him,' Nicolas said rather hastily.

'Of course not. One must be practical. A *sou* is a *sou*, whether from a nobleman or a beggar.'

Both men laughed. I did not like their laughter. I'm not close to Papa—he is a cold man with me as with everyone—but I didn't like his name and reputation thrown about like a stick for a dog to fetch. And Oncle Léon—I hadn't thought he could be disloyal.

'There are two things I have thought on looking at the designs, and doubtless Jean Le Viste will have other suggestions,' he said now.

'What two things?'

'There are to be six tapestries, *n'est-ce pas*? And they're following the Lady's seduction of the unicorn?'

'As I agreed with Monseigneur.'

'The seduction is clear enough, but I wondered if you have not concealed something else in the designs. Another way of looking at them.'

Nicolas's feet shifted about. 'What do you mean?'

'There seem to me to be here suggestions of the five senses.' Léon tapped on one of the drawings. 'The Lady playing the organ for the unicorn, suggesting Sound, for instance. And holding the unicorn by the horn is surely Touch. Here'—he tapped the table again—'the Lady weaves carnations into a crown for Smell.'

'Brides wear crowns of carnations,' Nicolas explained. 'The Lady is tempting the unicorn with the idea of marriage and the marriage bed. It's not meant to mean Smell.'

'Ah. Well, I suppose the senses are an accident, then.'

'I—'

'But do you see that you could weave in the senses? Have the unicorn sniff the carnation. And in the tapestry where the unicorn lies in the Lady's lap, you could have her show him a mirror, for Sight.'

'But that would make the unicorn seem vain, wouldn't it?'

'So? The unicorn does look a bit vain.'

Nicolas didn't answer. Perhaps he heard me under the table, snorting with laughter at him and his unicorn.

'Now, you have the Lady holding the unicorn's horn, that is Touch. Playing the organ, that is Sound. The carnations, that is Smell. The mirror, that is Sight. What is left? Taste. We have two tapestries left—those of Claude and Dame Geneviève.'

Maman? What did Léon mean?

'What do you mean, Claude and Dame Geneviève?'

'Come, you know exactly what I mean. That was my other suggestion. The likenesses are too apparent. Jean Le Viste won't like that. I know you are used to painting portraits, but in the final paintings you must make them look more like the other ladies. You know that Dame Geneviève and Claude are thorns in Jean Le Viste's side. He wouldn't want them depicted in something as valuable as the tapestries.'

'Oh!' I cried, and knocked my head against the tabletop. It hurt.

There were surprised grunts, then two faces appeared beneath the table. Léon was glaring, but Nicolas smiled when he saw it was me. He held out his hand and helped me up.

'Thank you,' I said when I was standing.

'What were you doing there, you naughty girl?' Oncle Léon said. 'Your father would be angry if he knew you had been spying on us.'

'My father would be angry if he knew what you said about him, Oncle Léon. And you, Monsieur,' I added, glancing at Nicolas.

There was a silence. I could see both men thinking back to their earlier words, trying to remember what would be offensive to Papa. They looked so worried that I couldn't help laughing.

Oncle Léon frowned at me. 'Claude, you really are a naughty girl.'

'Oh, I know. And what about you, Monsieur? Do you think I'm a naughty girl?' I asked Nicolas. It was wonderful to be able to see his handsome face.

I didn't know how he would answer, but he delighted me by saying, 'You are certainly the naughtiest girl I know, Mademoiselle.'

Oncle Léon snorted. 'That's enough. Claude, you must go now. Your father will be here soon.'

I ignored Oncle Léon and turned to Nicolas. 'No, I want to see the picture of my mother. Which one is it, Monsieur? I would like to see.'

Without a word he pulled a drawing across the table to me. Oncle Léon glared at him, but before he could say anything we heard footsteps in the hall. 'Go!' Léon hissed, but it was too late for me to escape. Nicolas put his hand on my head and gently pushed me down so that I was kneeling. For a moment my face was close to his bulging groin. I looked up and saw him smiling. Then he shoved me under the table.

Papa's feet came straight to the table, where he stood next to Léon, with Nicolas to one side. 'Now, the designs,' he said.

'Here they are, Monseigneur,' Nicolas said. 'As you see, you can look at them in this order. First the Lady dons her necklace for the seduction of the unicorn. In the next she plays the organ to get the unicorn's attention. And here she is—feeding a parakeet—and the unicorn has moved closer, though he is rampant and his head is still turned away. He is almost seduced, but needs more temptation.'

I noted the pause before Nicolas said 'feeding'. So, I have become Taste, I thought. Then taste me.

'Then the Lady weaves a crown of carnations in preparation for a wedding. Her own wedding. As you can see, the unicorn is now sitting calmly. At last'—Nicolas tapped the table—'the unicorn lies in her lap and they look at each other. And in the final tapestry she has tamed him; she holds him by the horn. The animals in the background are now in chains. They have become the slaves of love.'

Papa said nothing. He often does that, keeping quiet to make people unsure of themselves. It worked this time, too, for after a moment Nicolas began to speak again, sounding nervous.

'You can see, Monseigneur, that throughout the unicorn is accompanied by the lion, who represents nobility, strength and courage as a complement to the unicorn's purity and wildness. The lion is an example of noble savagery tamed.'

'Of course the background will be filled with *millefleurs*, Monseigneur,' Léon added. 'The Brussels weavers will design that

themselves—that is their speciality. Nicolas has only hinted at it here.'

There was another pause. I found I was holding my breath, waiting to see if Papa would remark on the drawings of Maman and me. 'There are not enough coats of arms,' he said at last.

'The unicorn and lion hold Le Viste banners and standards throughout,' Nicolas said. He sounded annoyed. I reached over and nudged his leg to remind him not to use such a tone with my father. Nicolas shuffled his feet.

'In two of the drawings there is only a banner,' Papa said.

'I could add shields for them to carry, Monseigneur.' Nicolas must have taken my hint, for he sounded calmer. I began to stroke his calf.

'The standard and banner poles should be spiked,' Papa declared. 'Not the round ends you have drawn.'

'But—spikes are for battles, Monseigneur.' Nicolas spoke as if someone were strangling him. I moved my hand up to his thigh.

'I want spikes on the poles,' Papa repeated. 'What happens to the unicorn when the Lady has caught him? Doesn't she lead him to the hunter who kills him? You should add another tapestry to complete the story.'

'I believe there is no room in the Grande Salle for another tapestry,' Oncle Léon said.

'Then replace one of these women. The one with the carnations, or the one feeding the bird.'

I dropped my hand.

'That is a very good idea, Monseigneur,' Oncle Léon said. 'It is a fine idea,' he repeated. 'Of course the boldness of the kill will contrast well with the more subtle hints of the battle poles. One would not want to be too cunning at the end, would one?'

'What do you mean, "too cunning"?'

'Well, one might simply imply the hunt—or the battle, if you like—with the spiked poles, the battle shields Nicolas has suggested adding, and perhaps something else. Let me think. What about a tent, the kind set up in battles for the King? That would also remind one of the King as well as the battle. But perhaps that would be too subtle. Perhaps a hunter killing the unicorn would be better.'

'No, I want the King's tent.'

I sat back on my heels in wonder at Oncle Léon. He had hooked Papa like a fish, without Papa even noticing, and brought him into land just where he pleased. 'All right, Nicolas, add a tent,' Léon said.

'Of course. Would Monseigneur like a special design on the tent?'

'A coat of arms,' Papa said.

'That goes without saying, Monseigneur. But I was thinking of a motto for a battle. Something to indicate that it is a battle for love.'

'I know nothing of love,' Papa growled. 'What would you have? I suspect you are familiar with it.'

I had an idea, and tapped Nicolas's leg. After a moment one of the drawings floated to the floor. 'Oh! *Pardon*, Monseigneur. I am so clumsy.' Nicolas crouched down to retrieve the drawing. I leaned over and whispered in his ear, '*C'est mon seul désir*.' Then I bit him.

Nicolas stood up.

'Is your ear bleeding?' Papa said.

'*Pardon*, Monseigneur. I knocked it against the table leg. But I have had a thought. What about "*A mon seul désir*"? It means—'

'That will do,' Papa cut him off. I knew that tone—it meant that the meeting had gone on for too long. 'Show your changes to Léon and bring the finished paintings here a fortnight after May Day. No later, as we leave for Château d'Arcy by Ascension Day.'

'Yes, Monseigneur.'

Papa's legs moved away from the table. 'Léon, come with me—I have things to discuss with you.'

Oncle Léon hesitated. He didn't want to leave me alone with Nicolas.

'Go,' I hissed. He went.

I did not come out from under the table, but remained there on my knees. After a moment Nicolas crouched next to me. We gazed at each other. '*Bonjour*, Mademoiselle,' he said.

I smiled. He was nothing like the kind of man my parents intended for me. I was glad. 'Are you going to kiss me, then?'

He had me on my back and was on top of me before I could think. Then his tongue was deep in my mouth and his hands were squeezing my breasts. It was a strange thing. I had been dreaming of this moment ever since meeting him, but now that there was a body on top of me, I was surprised by how different it felt from what I had dreamed. And I had not expected to think so much when a man was with me. With Nicolas I found words accompanying everything we did—'Why is he doing that? His tongue is so wet in my ear,' and 'His belt is jabbing into my side,' and 'Does that feel good?'

I was thinking too of my father and of the value he placed on my maidenhead. Could I really throw it away in a moment? Perhaps that more than anything stopped me from truly enjoying myself.

'Claude!'

I looked behind me and saw Béatrice's face glaring at us.

Nicolas pulled his hand from underneath my skirt, but he did not

immediately jump off me. That pleased me. He looked at Béatrice, and then he kissed me deeply before slowly sitting back on his knees.

'For this,' Béatrice said, 'I really will marry you, Nicolas des Innocents. I swear I will!'

Géneviève de Nanterre

I was glad that Claude hadn't come with us to visit my mother at Nanterre. Claude and I are like two cats around each other, our fur always ruffled. She is sullen with me, and her sideways looks are critical. I know she is comparing herself to me and thinking that she does not want to be like me. I do not want her to be like me either.

I went to see Père Hugo after I got back from Nanterre. As I sat down on a pew next to him I repeated what I had said the other morning. 'It is my one desire to join the convent at Chelles,' I said. '*Mon seul désir*. My grandmother joined before she died, and my mother is sure to as well.'

'You are not about to die, *mon enfant*. Nor is your husband. Your grandmother was a widow when she took the veil.'

'Do you think my faith is not strong enough? Shall I prove it?'

'It is not your faith that is so strong, but your desire to be rid of your life that is. The world of the convent should not be an escape from a life you hate—'

'A life I detest!' I bit my tongue.

Père Hugo waited a moment, then said, 'The best nuns are often those who have been happy outside, and are happy inside.'

I sat silent, my head bowed.

'Go home, Geneviève,' Père Hugo said then, and did sound kind. 'You have three lovely daughters, a fine house and a husband who is close to the King. These are blessings many women would be content with. Be a wife and mother, say your prayers, and may Our Lady smile down on you.'

'And on my cold bed—will she smile on that as well?'

'Go in peace, *mon enfant*.' Père Hugo was already getting to his feet.

I didn't leave immediately. I didn't want to go back to the rue du Four, to Claude's judging eyes or Jean's that would not meet mine. Better to stay in the church that had become my shelter. My favourite place is the Chapel of Sainte Geneviève, patron of Paris, who came from Nanterre and whom I am named after. I went there now, telling

my ladies as I knelt to leave me alone. They sat on the low step leading up to the chapel, a little way from me.

Jean has not come to my bed for months. He has always been formal with me in front of others, as befits our status. But he was once warm in bed. After Petite Geneviève was born he began to visit even more frequently, looking at last to make a son and heir. I was with child a few times but lost each one early on. These last two years there has been no sign of a baby. Indeed my courses ran dry, though I did not tell him. He found out somehow, and came to see me one night with this new knowledge, saying I had failed in the one thing expected of a wife and that he wouldn't touch me again.

Sometimes when I walk over to the Seine to look across at the Louvre, I think about throwing myself into the river. That is why the ladies keep close to me. They know. I let my rosary drop to the floor. 'Béatrice,' I called, 'pick up my beads.'

Two ladies helped me to my feet as Béatrice knelt to fetch the rosary. 'I would have a word with you, Madame,' she said in a low voice as she handed them back to me. 'Alone.'

I waited until we had gone outside and walked round to the great door of the monastery. As we passed through the gate and out into the street I said, 'I fancy a stroll down to the river. Béatrice, come with me—you others may go back.' Before the ladies could say more I pulled Béatrice by the arm and turned left down the road leading to the river.

'I have something to tell you about Claude,' Béatrice said then. 'She's been very foolish.'

I sighed. I didn't want to know, but I was her mother and was meant to. 'What did she do?'

'Do you remember that artist—Nicolas des Innocents—who is designing the tapestries for the Grande Salle?'

'I remember him.'

'While you were away she was with him, alone, under a table!'

'Under a table? Where?'

She hesitated, her big eyes fearful. Béatrice dresses well but even fine silk woven with gilt thread and dotted with jewels can't make her face anything but plain. Her eyes may be lively, but she has hollow cheeks and skin that goes red at the slightest upset. She was red now.

'It was in your husband's chamber,' Béatrice whispered.

'*Sainte Vierge*!' I crossed myself. 'How long were they alone?'

'I don't know. Just a few minutes, I think. But they were . . .' Béatrice stopped. I really did want to shake her.

'They were?'

'Not quite . . .'

'Where in heaven's name were *you*? You were meant to be keeping an eye on her!'

'I was! She gave me the slip, the silly thing. She asked me to fetch her—' Béatrice rattled her rosary—'oh, it doesn't matter. But she didn't lose her maidenhead, Madame.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. He was not . . . not yet undressed.'

'But she was?'

'Only partly.'

I gritted my teeth. Claude knows only too well how valuable her maidenhead is to the Le Vistes. She must be intact for a worthy man to marry her. Her husband will inherit the Le Viste wealth one day, if not the name. Jean will have chosen him carefully, and the husband in turn will expect Claude to be pious, respectful, admired, and a virgin, of course. If her father had caught her . . . I shivered.

'I will speak to her,' I said, no longer angry at Béatrice but furious at Claude for risking so much for so little. 'I will speak to her now.'

The ladies had gathered my daughters in my chamber when Béatrice and I returned. Claude sat at the window playing with a little dog.

'Claude, would you come with me. I want to look at your dress for the May Day feast. I'm not sure of the neckline.' I walked to the door and turned to wait for her. 'Just us,' I added as the ladies began to stir.

Claude got up, then walked past me and through the doorway. I followed her through the rooms separating hers from mine. She went straight to her chest and pulled out the new dress.

'There's nothing wrong with this neckline,' I said. 'That's not what I want to speak to you about.'

'What, then?' Claude went and stood by the window.

'Béatrice told me what happened with the artist.'

Claude rolled her eyes. 'Béatrice is disloyal.'

'*Au contraire*, she did exactly as she should. She is still my woman, and her loyalty is to me. But never mind about her. Whatever were you thinking? And in your father's chamber?'

'I want him, Maman.'

I snorted. 'Don't be absurd. You don't even know what that means.'

'What do you know of me?'

'I know that you're not to mix with the likes of him. An artist is little better than a peasant!'

'That's not true!'

'You know too well that you will marry the man your father chooses. A noble match for a nobleman's daughter. You aren't to go ruining that with an artist, or with anyone.'

Claude glared at me, her face full of spite. 'Just because you and Papa don't share a bed doesn't mean I too must be dry and hard as a shrivelled old pear!'

For a moment I thought I would hit her. I took a deep breath. '*Ma fille*, it's clearly you who knows nothing of me.' I opened the door. 'Béatrice!' I bellowed so loudly it carried throughout the house.

There was a short silence, then the door to the next room burst open and Béatrice came running through, the ladies behind her. She slowed when she saw me standing in the doorway. The ladies stopped at intervals in the room, like pearls on a string.

I reached for Claude's arm and pulled her roughly to the door so that she was facing Béatrice. 'Béatrice, you are now my daughter's lady in waiting. You are to remain with her at all hours of the day and night. You will go with her to Mass, to market, to visits, to her dancing lessons. You will eat with her, ride with her, sleep with her—not in the closet nearby but in her bed. You will never leave her side.

'At the May Day feast it will be your task, Béatrice, and all my ladies, to see that Claude comes close to no man there, either to speak to him or dance with him or even to stand next to him, for she cannot be trusted. First, though, the most important lesson she must learn is respect for her parents. To that end you are to take her immediately to my mother's at Nanterre for a week. I will send a messenger to tell her she may be quick with the whip if she needs to.'

'Maman,' Claude whispered, 'please don't—'

'Quiet! Béatrice, come and get her packed.'

'Yes, Madame,' she said, lowering her eyes.

BRUSSELS

Whitsuntide 1490

Georges de la Chapelle

I knew the moment I saw him that I wouldn't like him. I don't normally judge so quickly—I leave that to my wife. But when he walked in with Léon Le Vieux he looked around my workshop as if it were in some slummy Paris street rather than the rue Haute off the Place de la Chapelle—respectable enough for a *lissier*. This one is

too sure of himself, I thought. He'll be nothing but trouble.

I was surprised he had come at all. I've been weaving thirty years and never had an artist travel from Paris to see me. There's no need. All I want are the artist's designs and a good cartoonist like Philippe de la Tour to draw them large.

Léon hadn't warned me he would be bringing with him this Nicolas des Innocents, and they came earlier than expected. We were all in the workshop, preparing for the cutting-off of the tapestry we had been weaving. I had detached the cartoon from under the tapestry and was rolling it up to store with the other tapestry designs I own. Georges Le Jeune was removing the last of the bobbins. Luc was sweeping the floor where we would lay out the tapestry. Christine and Aliénor were sewing shut the last slits in the tapestry left between the colours. Philippe de la Tour stood by, rethreading Aliénor's needle, finding more slits in the tapestry for her to sew. He wasn't needed at the workshop, but he knew today was the cutting-off and found reasons to stay.

When Léon Le Vieux appeared at one of the workshop windows that open onto the street, my wife and I jumped up, and she ran to open the door for him. We were surprised that a stranger followed him in, but once Léon had introduced Nicolas as the artist who made the designs for the new tapestries, I nodded and said, 'You are welcome, gentlemen. My wife will bring you food and drink.'

Christine hurried through the doorway connecting the workshop and the house at the back. We have two houses together, one where we eat and sleep, the other the workshop. Both have windows and doors opening onto the street at the front and the garden at the back, to give the weavers clear light to work by.

Aliénor got to her feet to follow her mother. 'Tell your mother to bring in some cheese, some oysters,' I said quietly as she slipped away. 'Send Madeleine to buy some sweet cakes. And serve them double beer, not small.' I turned back to the men. 'Have you just come to Brussels?' I asked Léon. 'I was expecting you next week.'

'We arrived yesterday,' Léon said. 'The roads were very dry.'

'Is Brussels always so quiet?' Nicolas said.

'Some say it is already too lively,' I answered coolly, annoyed that his first words were spoken with such a sneer. 'Though I expect you're used to different in Paris. We get reports of the doings there.'

'Paris is the finest city in the world. When I go back I shall never leave it again.'

'If you like it so much, why did you come here?' Georges Le Jeune demanded. I shook my head at my plain-spoken son, though I couldn't

really blame him for speaking so. I wanted to ask it myself.

'Nicolas has come with me because of the importance of this commission,' Léon cut in smoothly. 'When you see the designs you will understand that they are very special and may require supervision.'

Georges Le Jeune snorted. 'We don't need minders.'

'This is my son, Georges Le Jeune,' I said. 'And my apprentice Luc, who has two years' training yet with us, but does fine *millefleurs*. This is Philippe de la Tour, who makes the cartoons from artists' designs.'

Nicolas glared at Philippe. 'I am not in the habit of having other men change my work,' he sneered. 'That's why I've come to this loathsome city—to be sure that my designs stay as I made them.'

I had never heard an artist so keen on his own work. He should know better. First designs always change when cartoonists make them into the large paintings on cloth or paper that weavers follow as they make the tapestries. It is the nature of the thing that what looks fine small doesn't when made large. There are gaps to be filled: figures must be added, or trees or animals or flowers. That is what a cartoonist like Philippe does well. When he draws large he fills the empty space so that the tapestry will be full and lively.

By the time the women returned we were ready to cut off the tapestry. The cutting-off is a good day for a weaver, when a piece you have worked on for so long—this time eight months on the one tapestry—is ready to be taken off the loom. Since we are always working on just a strip of tapestry the size of a hand's length, which is then rolled inside itself onto a wooden beam, we never see the tapestry whole until it is done. We also work on it from the back and don't see the finished side unless we slide a mirror underneath to check our work. Only when we cut the tapestry off the loom and lay it face-up on the floor do we get to see the whole work.

'Please eat,' I said, waving at the plates Christine and Aliénor had brought in. 'We'll take this tapestry off the loom and then we can discuss the commission from Monseigneur Le Viste.'

Léon nodded, but Nicolas muttered, 'Brussels fare, eh? Who can be bothered?' Nonetheless, he wandered over to the plates, picked up an oyster, tipped his head back, and slurped it down. Then he licked his lips and smiled at Aliénor. I chuckled to myself—eventually she would surprise him, but not yet. He was not so clever after all.

Before the cutting-off we knelt to say a prayer to St Maurice, patron saint of weavers. Then I took up a handful of warp threads, held them taut and snipped through them with a pair of scissors.

When I was done, Georges Le Jeune and Luc rolled the tapestry off

the bottom beam. They had the honour of cutting through the other end of the warp before they laid it down so that the tapestry was facing up. Then we all stood still and looked—save Aliénor, who went back into the house to fetch beer for the boys.

The scene in the tapestry was of the Adoration of the Magi. The Hamburg patron who commissioned it had paid handsomely. We had used both silver and gilt wire among the wool and silk, and where possible had dovetailed the colours, with plenty of hachure for the shading. It was glorious, even if it was the *lissier* saying so.

Georges Le Jeune broke the silence first. 'The Virgin's robe is very fine,' he said. 'I could swear it was velvet.'

'Not half so fine as the red hachure creeping up and down the young king's green hose,' Luc replied. 'Very striking.'

'Wasn't there an Adoration of the Magi made in Brussels for Charles de Bourbon a few years ago?' Léon said. 'The young king wore green hose in that tapestry as well, as I recall.'

I opened my mouth to speak, but closed it again. Léon had caught me out, and with very little cunning.

The Adoration of the Magi he spoke of had been woven at another Brussels workshop, but the cartoon design had been bought by Charles de Bourbon so that the tapestry would not be copied. I had admired the king's green hose in it and had used them in this work. I knew the other *lissier* well, and could bribe the Guild to keep quiet about my borrowing. But I had forgotten about Léon. He sees most work that goes in and out of Paris, and he never forgets details. I had broken a rule in copying the green hose, and now Léon could use that in the haggling. He could tell the Bourbons their design had been copied and I would be heavily fined.

'Will you have an oyster, Monsieur?' Christine held out a plate to Léon, bless her. She is a clever wife. Although she couldn't repair the damage done, she could at least distract him from it.

Léon Le Vieux gazed at her. 'Oysters don't agree with me, Madame, but thank you all the same. Perhaps a cake instead.'

Christine bit her lip. It was Léon's way to make even Christine feel wrong-footed and yet be so pleasant about it. It was impossible either to like him or despise him. I've worked with him before. He admires the workshop's *millefleurs* and has brought us several commissions, but I could not call him a friend. He keeps to himself.

'Come into the house where we can spread out the designs,' I said to him and Nicolas, gesturing to Philippe as well—I wanted him to see the designs too. Georges Le Jeune made to follow us. I shook my head.

'You and Luc stay here and begin undressing the loom. Clear the rollers of the remains of the warp. I'll be along later.'

Georges Le Jeune slumped his shoulders and turned back to the loom. Christine frowned at me. I frowned back. She had something on her mind. Later she would tell me what it was—she always does.

Just then Nicolas des Innocents asked, 'What is she doing?' He was watching Aliénor, who was running her hands over the tapestry.

'Checking her work,' Philippe answered, going red in the face. He is protective of Aliénor, as a brother might be.

I led the men inside to where Christine and Madeleine had set on trestles the long table where we eat. Léon began to unroll the canvases, and Christine got out tankards to weigh down the corners.

We looked for a long time. When I finally spoke I kept the surprise from my tone. The first words to say when negotiating with the patron's man are not praise. I always start with the problems. 'He's not designed tapestries before, has he? These are paintings, not designs. There is no story within each tapestry, and not enough figures.'

Nicolas began to say something, but Léon interrupted. 'Is that all you can say about them? Look once more, Georges. You may not see the likes of such designs again.'

'What is it, then? What is meant to be the story?'

Aliénor appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the workshop, an empty mug in each hand.

'The Lady's seduction of the unicorn,' Nicolas said, turning towards Aliénor. The fool. 'Also there are the five senses'—he pointed—'Smell, Sound, Taste, Sight, Touch.'

We looked for longer. 'There are definitely too few figures,' I said. 'And much space to fill. We would have to design a field of *millefleurs*.'

'Which is what you are known for, and why I chose you for the commission,' Léon replied. 'It should be simple for you.'

'It isn't that simple. We'll have to add other things,' I said. 'More people, more animals, more plants. Eh, Philippe?' The silly lad was gazing at the paintings as if he were looking on the most beautiful woman in Brussels.

Philippe tore his eyes from the designs. '*Bien sûr*.'

'What would you add to them, apart from people and animals?'

'Oh. Er, trees, perhaps, to give it structure. Or a trellis of roses.'

'Tell me the size of the tapestries,' I said to Léon Le Vieux.

Léon went through them while I added up in my head. 'What about gilt or silver thread? Silk? Wool? How many figures in each? How dense the *millefleurs*? How much blue? Dovetailing or not?' As Léon

answered each question, I altered the time and cost of the work.

'I can do them in three years,' I said at last. 'It will cost four hundred *livres tournois*, and I keep the designs.'

'Monseigneur wants them finished by Palm Sunday 1492,' Léon said. 'He will pay three hundred *livres tournois* for them and for the designs, which he will keep. He wants fully painted cartoons he can hang in place of the tapestries if he takes those with him somewhere.'

'Impossible,' I said. 'You know that's impossible, Léon. That's in less than two years. I can't possibly weave them so fast, for so little. In fact, your offer is insulting. You'd best take it elsewhere.'

'You can take on twice the men and make them in half the time.'

'It's not so simple. A work like this can't be rushed. Then there are other jobs I agreed to long before you told me about this one.'

Léon waved his hand to dismiss my arguments. 'Give up the other jobs. You will manage. Look at them, Georges.' He held his hand out to the designs. 'You can see that this is an important commission, perhaps the most important this workshop has ever been offered.'

Nicolas looked pleased. Compliments from Léon were rare.

'What I see,' I said, 'are designs made by a man who knows nothing about tapestries. We will have to make many changes to them.'

Léon spoke smoothly over Nicolas's splutters. 'Perhaps a few changes will make the terms more appealing.'

'What about the gilt thread?' Philippe suggested. 'The Lady is not royal, nor is she the Virgin. Her dress doesn't have to be gilted.'

'Yes,' I said. 'The gilt is costly and hard to use.'

Léon shrugged. 'So we leave off the gilt.'

'The dovetailing too,' I added. 'It is not such an easy technique to interweave colours, and the weaving takes longer. If Monseigneur Le Viste truly wants the best, he'll have to pay more and allow more time.'

'There isn't more time,' Léon said. 'He wants them for Easter 1492, for an important occasion. And he isn't a patient man.'

'Then he can't have gilt or dovetailed weaving. That is your choice.'

I watched Léon as he thought. 'All right,' he said.

'I have not agreed to take it on,' I said. 'There's more to discuss. Philippe, you and Nicolas take the designs into the workshop. I'll join you later. Aliénor, go and help your mother to sew the hem of the Adoration of the Magi.'

Aliénor made a face. She likes to listen to the haggling. 'Go,' I said.

With the room clear, I poured us more beer, and Léon and I sat back to drink. Now that the others weren't hanging over our necks, I could think seriously about Léon's offer.

THAT EVENING Christine and I went for a walk in the Grand-Place and she said what I knew had been ready on her lips all afternoon. 'You should have let Georges Le Jeune hear the business between you and Léon. He is a good lad and a good weaver. You've trained him well in that. But if he is to take over the workshop he needs to know about the business side as well; the haggling, the terms agreed.'

I shrugged. 'I'll be the *lissier* a long time yet. There is no hurry.'

Christine pursed her lips. 'Georges, your hair is going grey. Your son is a man. One day the workshop will be his. Do you want him to ruin it and destroy all you've built up? You have to—'

'That's enough, Christine.' She clamped her mouth shut. I would think on what she said. Some men don't listen to their wives, but I do listen to mine. I would be a fool not to. Christine was brought up a weaver's daughter near Notre Dame du Sablon, and knows almost as much about the running of a workshop as I do.

We walked in silence until the cathedral's twin towers loomed up before us in the growing dark.

'So, Georges,' Christine said. 'What did you decide, you and Léon Le Vieux? Did you take the work?'

I kicked at a bit of horse dung. 'I've not said yes, I've not said no. I may have no choice, what with the problem of the green hose. Léon could go to the Bourbon family to say I copied their design.'

'You didn't copy, you only borrowed one detail. The Guild will back you.' She stopped in her tracks, her skirt swaying. 'Tell me—are we to make these tapestries or not?'

I should not make them. All of my experience as a *lissier* told me not to. The money was poor, I would lose other work and strain to finish them on time. The workshop could be ruined. 'Yes,' I said, my gut knotting. 'We will make them. I have never seen designs so fair.'

Christine laughed then. I think she was relieved. 'They will be the making of us,' she said. 'You'll see.'

Philippe de la Tour

No one was in the workshop when I arrived in the morning. I was glad, for I could look at the designs alone and think in peace.

Nicolas's designs had been rolled up and stored in a chest with other tapestry designs. I got them out now, and spread them on the floor. When Nicolas and I had been talking about them, he'd kept looking

over at Aliénor as she sat with her mother, sewing on the tapestry that had just been cut off. He had turned himself this way and that, thinking it was for her benefit. At last he had said to her, 'Shouldn't you put down your sewing now, beauty?'

Aliénor and Christine had both raised their heads. No one had ever called Aliénor 'beauty' before. I think she is beautiful, especially her hair, which is long and golden, but it is hard for me to say such things. She would laugh at me and tell me I am a fool. She treats me like a younger, silly brother, even though I am a few years her elder.

'It's so dark over where you are,' Nicolas continued. 'You'll get a squint. You should sit closer to the window where the light is better. Besides, I've heard of all the rules you Brussels weavers work by. No work outside daylight, no work on Sundays.'

Christine and I stared at him in astonishment, but Aliénor bowed her head over her work, trying not to laugh. She did, though, and then Christine burst out laughing, and I joined them.

'What is so funny?' Nicolas demanded. That made us laugh harder.

'Such rules don't apply to women,' Aliénor said when we had finally stopped laughing. 'We're not weavers, we're just family.'

'I see,' Nicolas said. He looked puzzled, though, for that didn't explain our laughter. We weren't going to tell him, either. It was good to have a joke on the Paris man.

I was still looking at the designs when Georges entered the workshop. He came over to me. 'Can you make them into proper designs?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'*Bien*. Make some small sketches of the changes for Léon to see. When he's satisfied you can start on the cartoons.'

I nodded. Georges stared at the painting of the Lady with the unicorn in her lap. 'Nicolas is to stay on and paint the cartoons.'

I stepped back. 'Why? You know I can paint as well as he.'

'Léon wants it. It is part of the terms of the work. Monseigneur Le Viste is buying the cartoons and Léon wants to be sure they look exactly as Nicolas has painted the designs. You will draw the cartoons and help with the painting.'

I wanted to protest but I knew I mustn't. Georges is the *lissier*. He decides what is to be done and I do it. 'Does Nicolas know?'

'Léon is telling him. In fact, I'm going to see him now, to go over the contract.' Georges looked down at the paintings and shook his head. 'These things are going to bring me trouble. Poor wages, little time, a difficult patron. I must be mad.'

'When do we start?'

'Now. Georges Le Jeune and Luc have gone to buy the linen and will be back soon. If the weather holds you can paint in Aliénor's garden,' he said as he left the room. 'That will keep you out of the weavers' way—it will be crowded in here with two looms.'

I wasn't sure I wanted Nicolas around Aliénor so much. She had never shown any interest in men until now, and I didn't trust him. Even as I thought of her, she appeared in the doorway with my morning beer. She is a little thing, small and neat. The rest of her family is much taller. 'I'm here, Aliénor,' I said. She came towards me with a smile.

She stood at my side, the designs at our feet, while I drank. I tried not to gulp my beer loudly. When I'm with Aliénor I'm aware of how noisy I am: my boots creak, my teeth chatter, I scratch my head.

'Tell me about the story,' she said. Her voice is low and smooth—smooth like the way she walks or turns her head or picks up something or smiles. She is careful in everything she does.

'What do you mean?' I asked. My voice is not so smooth.

'The tapestries. The Lady and the unicorn. What is the story?'

'Ah, that. Well, in the first there is a Lady standing in front of a blue tent with words on it. *A mon seul désir*.' I read it slowly.

'*A mon seul désir*,' Aliénor repeated.

'The lion and the unicorn sit holding open the tent flaps as well as the banner and standard of the Le Viste family. The Lady is taking jewels from a casket, and she wears them in the other tapestries. Then there are three tapestries where the Lady draws the unicorn nearer. Finally he sits in her lap and looks at himself in a mirror. In the last one she leads him away, holding his horn.'

'Which drawing of the Lady is the prettiest?'

'The one where she is feeding a parakeet. That is meant to be Taste, of the five senses. The unicorn looking in the mirror is Sight, and the Lady holding his horn is Touch. That's clear enough. Then there is Sound, where the Lady plays an organ. And this one is Smell, I think, for a monkey sits on a bench and sniffs a flower.'

'What kind of flower?' She always wants to know about the flowers.

'You can see for yourself, beauty.' Nicolas was leaning in the doorway, watching us. 'You keep a garden, I've heard. You must know a carnation from a rose when you see it, eh?' He stepped into the workshop.

'Don't call her that,' I said. 'She's the daughter of the *lissier*. She should be treated with respect.'

Aliénor had turned red, though whether from Nicolas's words or mine, I don't know.

'What do you know of unicorns, beauty?' he said with a sly look I did not like. 'Shall I tell you about them?'

Aliénor didn't seem to be listening, but was wrinkling her nose in disgust. Then I smelt it, and a moment later Nicolas did too. '*Dieu au ciel*, what is that?' he cried. 'It smells like a barrow full of piss!'

'It's Jacques Le Bœuf,' I said. 'The woad dyer.'

'Is that what woad smells like? I've never been near the stuff. In Paris they have to work outside the city walls.'

'Here too, but he still comes into town. You can't ban a man from his business. Mind you, his dealings are always brief.'

'Where's Georges's girl?' Jacques Le Bœuf's booming voice came from inside the house.

'Georges is out,' we heard Christine say. 'Come back another day.'

'Not him. I want to see her, just for a moment. Is she in the shop?'

Aliénor was crouching behind the loom.

'She's gone out,' Nicolas said. 'She's gone to get me some oysters.'

'Has she, now?' Jacques pulled his whole body into view. He is a big man, like a barrel with a scraggly beard and hands stained blue from the woad. 'And who are you to be telling her what to do?'

'Nicolas des Innocents. I've designed the new tapestries for Georges.'

'The Paris artist, are you?' Jacques leaned against the doorway. 'We don't think much of Paris men, do we, Philippe?'

I made to answer but then he came to stand next to us and look down at the paintings on the floor. I tried not to gag at the smell. 'More red than blue in them. Maybe it's not worth my while for Georges to work on them.' He grinned and made to step on the painting of the Lady with the unicorn in her lap.

'Jacques, what are you doing?'

Christine's sharp words made Jacques Le Bœuf freeze. He took a step back, the sheepish look on his big face comical.

Christine hurried up to him. 'If this is your idea of a jest, it's not funny. I said Georges was out. He'll come to speak to you soon about the blue wool for these tapestries. Off you go, now—we're busy here.' She opened the door onto the street and stood aside.

It was like watching a dog round up a cow. Jacques hung his head and shuffled to the door. 'Tell the girl I was asking for her.'

When we were sure he was gone, Nicolas leaned over and smiled at Aliénor by the loom. 'You can come out now, beauty. The beast is gone.' He held out a hand. After a moment she reached out and took it, then let him help her up. When she was standing she raised her face to his and said, 'Thank you, Monsieur.'

It was the first time she had looked at him in the way that Aliénor looks—her eyes trying but not able to meet anyone's—and Nicolas's smile disappeared as he gazed into her face. He looked as if he had been winded by a blow. Finally, I thought, he sees.

Aliénor knew that he finally understood—she had chosen to let him see. Now she pulled her hand from his and bowed her head.

'Come, Aliénor,' Christine said with a fierce look at Nicolas, 'or we'll be late.'

'Mass,' Aliénor reminded me, before running out.

'How long has she been like that?' Nicolas said after a moment.

'All her life. That's why it is easy not to notice. It is natural for her.'

'How does she . . .' Nicolas waved at the Adoration of the Magi tapestry, which was draped over the loom it had been woven on.

'Her fingers are very skilled and sensitive. She can tell the difference between blue and red wool because she says the dyes feel different. And she hears things that we don't. She told me once that each person has a different footstep. She will know your footstep now.'

'Is she still a girl?'

'Leave her be,' I said sharply. Suddenly I did not want to talk about her. 'Touch her and her father will tear you apart, Paris artist or not.'

'I have plenty whenever I like. It's you I was thinking of. Though I expect the girls like you well enough, with those long lashes of yours. I can see that I will have to tell you both about the unicorn's horn.'

'Not now. We need to start work. They can't begin the weaving until we've painted one of the cartoons.' I gritted my teeth as I said 'we'. 'Have you ever drawn or painted cartoons?'

Nicolas stopped smirking. He doesn't like to be reminded of what he does not know.

'Tapestries are very different from paintings,' I said. 'Artists think that whatever they paint can simply be made bigger. But looking at a tapestry is not like looking at a painting. A painting is usually smaller so that you can see everything at once. With a tapestry you stand close and you see only a part of it, and not necessarily the most important part. So no thing should stand out more than the rest, everything must fit together into a pattern that your eye takes pleasure in no matter where it rests. These paintings don't have that pattern in them. The *millefleur* background will help, but we will still have to change them.'

'How?' Nicolas said.

'Add things. More figures, for a start. The Lady should at least be attended by a lady in waiting, *n'est-ce pas*? You have a servant holding the jewellery casket in A Mon Seul Désir. Why not in the others?'

'In a seduction a lady should be alone.'

'Ladies in waiting must have witnessed seductions.'

'How would you know . . . have you ever seduced a noblewoman?'

I turned red. I could not dream of being in a noblewoman's chamber. Clearly Nicolas had been with noblewomen.

'What do noblewomen smell like?' I asked before I could stop myself.

Nicolas smiled. 'Cloves. Cloves and mint.'

Aliénor smells of lemon balm. She treads on it in her garden.

'Do you know what they taste like?' he added.

'Don't tell me.' I reached for my bag, pulled out paper and charcoal and, choosing the painting of Smell to copy, began to sketch. I drew a few lines for the woman's face and headdress, then her necklace, bodice, sleeves and dress. 'We don't want large blocks of colour. For instance, the yellow underdress needs more pattern.'

Nicolas watched over my shoulder as I filled in the triangle of cloth with leaves and flowers. 'Already this is much better. The *millefleurs* behind will fill out the scene. I won't draw them here, but on the cartoon. Aliénor can help us with them then.'

'How can she be of use to us?' Nicolas gestured at his eyes.

I frowned. 'She always helps her father with the *millefleurs*. She keeps a fine kitchen garden and knows the plants well, knows their uses. We'll speak to her once we begin the cartoons. *Alors*, among the *millefleurs* we will add some animals.' I sketched as I spoke. 'A dog somewhere for fidelity, perhaps. A lamb at her feet to remind us of Christ and Our Lady. And of course a rabbit or two. That is Georges's signature—a rabbit holding a paw to its face.'

'That is better,' Nicolas said when I was done. He sounded surprised. 'But can we make changes without the patron agreeing to it?'

'It's part of the *verdure*,' I said. 'Weavers are allowed to design the plants and animals of the background—it's only the figures we can't change. There was a law passed about it some years ago in Brussels, so that there wouldn't be problems between patrons and weavers.'

'Or between artists and cartoonists.'

'That too.'

He looked at me. 'Are there problems between us?'

'No,' I replied. Not about work, at least, I added to myself. I am not brave enough to say such things aloud.

'Good.' Nicolas picked up Taste. 'Now do this one.'

I studied the Lady feeding her parakeet. 'You've painted her face with more care than the others. She stands out too much. The Lady in A Mon Seul Désir as well—she is too sad.'

'I won't change them.'

'You know them well, don't you?'

He shook his head. 'Not so well. They are noblewomen. I've seen them a few times, but . . .'

I was surprised to see him wince.

'The last time I saw them was at May Day,' Nicolas continued. 'She'—he pointed to Taste—'was dancing round a maypole while her mother watched. I couldn't get near her. Her ladies made sure of that.' He frowned at the memory. 'I still think there should be no servant in these tapestries.'

'Why don't we put servants in all but the one in which she captures the unicorn? In Sight, when he lies in her lap.'

'And Touch,' Nicolas added, 'when she is holding his horn. You don't want a chaperone then.' He smiled. He had become himself again, his mood like a storm suddenly spent.

Aliénor de la Chapelle

The men found me weeding the strawberries. I heard Philippe on the path between the squares—he scrapes one of his toes when he walks—and Nicolas des Innocents's bouncing step behind him. The first time Nicolas came into my garden he said, 'Sainte Vierge, it's a paradise! I've never seen such a kitchen garden in Paris.' It was the only time I'd heard him praise something in Brussels as better than Paris.

People are always surprised by my garden. It has six squares, laid out as a cross, with the fruit trees—apple and plum and cherry—at the corners. Two squares are of vegetables, and one square is of strawberries and herbs—that was where I was weeding. Then there is a rose bed and two beds for the flowers and more herbs.

I smiled when Philippe announced, 'It's only us, Aliénor. Myself and Nicolas des Innocents. Here we are, by the lavender.' He has known me all my life, yet he still tells me where he is when I already know. I could smell the woody scent of the lavender they were brushing against. I sat back on my heels and raised my face to the sun.

'Will you pick me a strawberry, Mademoiselle?' Nicolas asked.

'They're not ripe yet,' I snapped. I had meant to sound pleasant but he made me feel strange. And he was talking too loudly. People often do when they discover I'm blind.

'Ah. Never mind, I expect they'll ripen before I go back to Paris.'

'Aliénor, we need your help with the *millefleurs* for the tapestries,' Philippe said. 'We've drawn some of the design large for the cartoon. But we want you to point out flowers for us to use.'

I am always glad to be asked for help. I spend my life being useful so that my parents will never find me a burden and send me away.

'You must describe the tapestries to me in detail,' I said to Philippe. 'Where is the Lady looking—at the unicorn or at the lion? What is she wearing? Is she happy or sad? Does the Lady love the unicorn?'

Philippe began rustling paper, laying out the designs. The sound annoyed me. I turned to Nicolas. 'Monsieur, you have made the designs. Surely you know them so well that you can describe them without looking at your drawings.'

Philippe stopped rustling.

'Of course, Mademoiselle,' Nicolas replied. There was a smile in his voice. '*Bon*, what were all of those questions you asked?'

I couldn't think now what I wanted to know from him. I wasn't used to the attentions of such a man. 'How much blue is in the tapestries?' I said at last.

'How much would you like there to be, Mademoiselle?'

'None, unless you are willing to stay and fight with Jacques Le Bœuf each time he comes.'

Nicolas laughed. 'The Lady stands on blue grass that makes up the bottom part of each tapestry. But we can make that grassy part smaller. Perhaps an island of grass floating among red, encircling the Lady and the unicorn and lion. Yes, that could work very well.'

'Thank you, Monsieur,' I said. '*Eh bien*, what does the Lady look like? Describe her to me. Describe Taste. Is she really very beautiful?'

'Yes.'

'Is she smiling?'

'A small smile, yes. She is looking to her left, thinking of something.'

'What is she thinking of?'

'The unicorn's horn.'

'Don't, Nicolas,' Philippe said sharply.

That made me more curious. 'What about his horn?'

'The unicorn's horn is magical,' Nicolas said, 'with special powers. They say that if a unicorn dips his horn into a poisoned well, the water will become pure again. He can make other things pure as well.'

'What other things?'

There was a pause. 'That's enough about it for now. Perhaps I'll tell you another time.' Nicolas added the last under his breath so that only I heard. My ears are sharper than Philippe's.

'*Bon*,' I said. 'Let me think. There should be mint among the *millefleurs*, for it guards against poison. Solomon's seal as well. And marigolds and daisies and speedwell.'

'*Attends*, Aliénor, you go too fast. I'll get some more paper for sketches, and stools so that we can sit.' Philippe ran to the workshop.

I was alone with Nicolas. I had never been alone with a man like him. 'Why do they call you Nicolas des Innocents?' I asked.

'I live near the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris.'

'Ah. I didn't think you yourself were innocent.'

Nicolas chuckled. 'Already you know me well, beauty.'

'I would like to touch your face, so that I will know you better.' It was bold of me. I've not even asked to touch Philippe's face and I've known him since we were children.

But Nicolas is from Paris; he is used to boldness. '*Bien sûr*,' he said. He knelt in front of me and I put my hands up to his face. He had soft hair to his shoulders, and his chin and cheeks were sandy with stubble. His forehead was broad. His chin, below his wide mouth, had a cleft in it. I squeezed his long thin nose and he laughed.

I felt his face only for a moment before he jumped up and leapt to the path. When Philippe returned, dragging stools through the pebbles, we were as we had been before.

I stepped into the path and led them to the flowerbeds. 'Many of the flowers are blooming now, though you have missed a few. There are no more violets, nor lily of the valley, nor periwinkle. But the foxglove and speedwell are flowering already, and one or two of the marigolds. Do you see them, near the plum trees?'

'Yes,' Nicolas said. 'You grow everything here, *n'est-ce pas*? Why do you take such care when you can't see them?'

'I grow them for others to see, but especially for Papa, so that he may know the flowers he weaves and can copy their true shapes and colours. That's why our *millefleurs* are so fine.'

Philippe asked me about other plants he saw there and I knelt and felt them—blue gromwell, saxifrage, soapwort. Then he sat and began to sketch, his charcoal scraping along the rough paper.

'You may want some of the early spring flowers too,' I reminded him. 'Snowdrops and hyacinths. They're not blooming now but you can look at some of Papa's designs if you don't remember them.'

'Nicolas, bring out the linen where I've begun drawing Sound, and I'll add the *millefleurs*,' Philippe said.

I thought that Nicolas might say something sharp back, but instead he went without a word to the workshop. I didn't know why,

but suddenly I didn't want to be alone with Philippe, in case he wanted to say something to me. I slipped away to join Maman inside. I could smell what she was cooking for dinner—trout, new carrots from the garden, dried beans and peas boiled into a mush.

'What do you think of this Nicolas des Innocents?' Maman said.

I smiled. 'A vain, cocky fellow.'

'That he is. Handsome, though. I expect he's got many girls into trouble back in Paris. I hope he won't be trouble here. You be careful around him, *ma fille*.'

'What would he want with a blind girl like me?'

'Eyes are not what he's after.'

My face went hot. I turned from her as Papa and the boys returned from meeting the wool merchant. 'I've ordered the wool and silk,' Papa said to Maman. 'They'll bring it in a few days.'

Maman nodded. 'The meal is ready. Where are Philippe and Nicolas?'

'In the garden,' I said. I could feel her eyes on my back as I went to fetch them.

As we ate, Papa asked Nicolas about Paris. We are always keen to hear about other places. Papa has been to Ostend, and to other weaving towns like Lille and Tournai, but never as far as Paris.

'What is Notre Dame de Paris like?' Papa asked. 'I've heard it's even bigger than the cathedral here.'

Nicolas laughed. 'Your cathedral is a shepherd's hut compared to Notre Dame. Notre Dame is heaven brought straight down to earth. It has the most beautiful towers, the loudest bells, the most stunning stained glass. What I would give to design such glass.'

I was about to ask more about the bells when Philippe said quietly, '*En fait*, we *Brusselois* are proud of our cathedral. The western façade will be complete later this year. And our other churches—the little Notre Dame du Sablon is very beautiful, what has been built of it. The stained glass there is as fine as any Paris glass.'

'How long does it take to walk across Paris?' Luc asked.

'At least as long as two Masses said together,' Nicolas said. 'And that is if you don't stop at any of the stalls or taverns.'

'It doesn't sound so different from Brussels, only bigger, and with more strangers,' Georges Le Jeune said.

Nicolas snorted. 'It is very different from here.'

'How? Apart from the women, I suppose?'

'Actually, Brussels women are better-looking than I'd first thought. You just have to look more closely.'

I flushed. Madeleine, our servant, giggled and shifted on the bench so that I was pushed against Maman.

'That's enough, Monsieur,' Maman said sharply. 'Show some respect or—Paris artist or no—you'll be out on your arse!'

'Christine!' Papa said, while Georges Le Jeune and Luc laughed.

'I speak as I feel. There's Aliénor and Madeleine to think of. I don't want some honey-tongued charmer worming his way among them.'

Papa began to say something, but Nicolas interrupted. 'I assure you, Madame, that I meant no disrespect to you or your daughter, nor to the fair Madeleine.'

Madeleine squirmed again and I had to nudge her with my toe. 'We'll see,' Maman said.

After dinner Maman and Papa went into the workshop. Although Maman is not meant to weave—the Guild would fine Papa if she did—she often helps him with other work. Her father was a weaver, and she knows how to dress a loom, thread heddles, wind and sort wool, and work out how much wool and silk are needed for each tapestry, and how much time they will take to make.

While they were in the workshop I worked out in the garden again, weeding and showing the men the flowers they needed as they drew and painted the cartoon on a piece of large linen cloth. We were peaceful together, and I was glad.

Later, I was passing through the kitchen when I heard the name of Jacques Le Bœuf. I stopped beside the door leading to the workshop.

'I saw him today, to tell him I would order the blue soon,' Papa was saying. 'He asked about her again.'

'There's no rush, is there?' Maman said. 'She's only nineteen. Plenty of girls wait longer than that, and it's not as if women are waiting outside his door to marry him.'

'The smell would kill them, for a start,' Papa said.

They chuckled. I held my buckets very still and did not breathe for fear my parents would hear me. Then I felt someone from the garden stop in the doorway behind me.

'It is the only offer she has had, though,' Papa said. 'We shouldn't dismiss it out of hand. It's not easy, finding a husband for a blind girl.'

'She doesn't have to marry.'

'What, and be a burden to the workshop all her life?'

I flinched. Clearly I had not been useful enough.

Whoever was behind me moved a little, and after a moment stepped quietly back into the garden, leaving me to my silent tears. That is one use my eyes share with others—they do make tears.

Christine du Sablon

Aliénor and Nicolas were in the garden when I came out—he painting, she on a ladder pruning the cherry trees. Philippe had gone to his father, who is also a painter, for more paints. Though they were each busy with their work, I did not like them being alone in the garden. My daughter is a sensible girl, but I have seen her change when he walks into the room.

Nicolas was working on Smell, painting onto a piece of linen where a sketch had been made in charcoal. Cocky as he is, he is a fine artist.

He stopped painting and came to stand with me in front of Sound. It was the only one painted large so far, and was pinned up on the garden wall. 'What do you think of the painting, Madame? You've said nothing about it. Very pretty, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'You're never one to wait for a compliment, are you? You're happy to make one to yourself.'

'Do you like her dress?'

I shrugged. 'The dress is fine, but even better are the *millefleurs*. Philippe has done a fine job, and with the animals in the grass too.'

'I've done the unicorn and the lion. What do you think of them?'

'The unicorn is too fat, and is not as vigorous as I expected.'

Nicolas frowned.

'There's no time to change it now,' I added. 'It will do. The lion at least is full of character. *Tu sais*, with his round eyes and wide mouth he looks a bit like Philippe.'

Aliénor chuckled from up the cherry tree.

I moved over to Smell. Nicolas was painting the Lady's face but had not yet started on her dress. I was impatient to see it. 'What is the Lady's dress like in this one? And the servant's?'

Nicolas smiled. 'She wears a red pomegranate brocade under a blue dress. The servant's dress mirrors her mistress's—blue overdress, red underdress—but the cloth is a plainer moiré.'

He sounded so smug as he described them that I had to say something. 'A servant should not wear two necklaces,' I said. 'One would do, and a plain chain at that.'

Nicolas bowed. 'Anything else, Madame?'

'Don't be cheeky.' I lowered my voice. 'And stay away from my daughter.'

Aliénor's steady rustling in the cherry tree stopped. 'Maman!' she

shouted. I am always surprised by what she can hear.

Before either could say more, Georges called us all into the workshop to warp the loom. We had already begun preparing the loom for weaving—setting the warp threads into a raddle and attaching them to the beam at one end of the loom. Now it was time to wind the warp onto the back beam before attaching it to the front beam to make the surface to weave on. To warp a loom for a tapestry of this size you need at least four people to hold bundles of warp threads and pull on them while two men turn the roller to wind the warp round the back beam. Someone else checks the tension of the threads. Aliénor always does this; her hands are so sensitive they are well suited to the task.

Georges and Georges Le Jeune were already standing at each end of the roller when we came in. Aliénor went to join her father while I showed Nicolas the bundles of warp threads laid out for us. Luc stood holding some at one end.

We were one person short. 'Where's Philippe?' Georges asked.

'Still at his father's,' Nicolas said.

'Madeleine, put the lentils at the back of the fire and come out here!' I called.

Madeleine appeared from the fire, sooty and hot. We took up a bundle in each hand and stood at a distance from the loom. I showed Nicolas and Madeleine how to hold the threads tightly and evenly round their hands and pull firmly. We held our bundles and were pulled slowly towards the loom as Georges and Georges Le Jeune turned the cranks at each end of the roller. When they stopped for a moment, Aliénor stepped up to the warp as it lay across the roller and walked along, brushing her hand over the threads. Her face was bright and attentive, a look I see on Georges's face when he is weaving. When she reached the end she turned and walked back, stopping with her hand across threads Nicolas held. 'Too loose,' she said. 'Here, and here.' She reached along and touched threads of Madeleine's.

'Pull harder with your left hands,' I ordered both. 'Those are your weak hands—always pull harder with them.'

Nicolas groaned. 'This could take hours. My arms ache.'

'Pay attention and it will go faster,' I snapped.

As Georges and Georges Le Jeune turned the crank, I smelt something burning. 'The lentils!'

Madeleine jumped. 'Don't let go!' I cried. 'Aliénor, go and take the lentils off the fire.'

A fearful look crossed Aliénor's face. I knew she did not like fire, but there was nothing for it—she had the only free hands.

'Madeleine, did you move those lentils to the back as I asked you?' I said as Aliénor ran from the workshop.

The girl scowled at the threads in her hands. Her fingers were red and white from the threads wound round them so tight.

'Stupid girl.'

Aliénor came back. 'I've put the pot on the floor,' she said.

We went back to the warping, but it was not so much fun now. My arms ached too, and I was fretting about dinner and what I would serve. I would have to run to the baker's wife for a pie—she sells them from her house while her husband is at the Bread Hall.

Nicolas began rolling his eyes from boredom. 'What do you do after you finish this tedious task?' he asked.

'We thread the heddles, to make the shed,' I said.

Nicolas looked blank. 'Heddles are strings that pull every other thread apart so that you can run the weft through them,' I explained. 'You push a pedal and the warp separates into two. The space between those sets of threads is the shed.'

'Where do you put the tapestry as you're weaving it?'

'It gets wound onto this beam here in front of us.'

Nicolas thought for a moment. 'But then you don't see it.'

'No. Only the strip you're working on, then it gets wound on. You don't see the whole tapestry at once until you've finished.'

'That's impossible. It would be like painting blind!' Even as he said it he winced and looked at Aliénor, who continued feeling the threads as if she had not heard him.

Still he kept asking questions. 'Where will the cartoon go?'

'On a table beneath the warp, so we can look at it as we weave. Philippe will trace the design onto the warp threads as well.'

'Less talk, more thought to your work,' Georges said. 'Or we'll be at this till nightfall.'

It was not as long as that, though. We were finished at last, and I could go and sort out dinner.

'*Viens*, Aliénor,' I said. 'You can help me choose the pie that smells best.' Aliénor loves going to the baker's house.

'Please, Madame, I'll fetch one for you if only you'll let me have some as well,' Madeleine said.

'It's scorched lentils for your dinner, girl. You just fetch the men some drink when you're done here and then scrub that pot.'

Aliénor held my sleeve just above my elbow as we stepped along the rue Haute. She is spry on her feet and those who don't know her don't guess, just as Nicolas did not. She knows her way so well that she

doesn't really need me to guide her. She prefers not to walk alone, though. She would rather hold my arm.

Ahead of us I could smell the baker's wife's beef pies. She puts juniper berries in them, and stamps the crust with a jester's laughing face. That always makes me smile.

Aliénor was not smiling. Instead, she was wrinkling her nose, her face screwed up with misery and disgust.

'What's the matter?' I cried.

'Please, Maman, can we go to the Sablon, just for a moment?'

Then I smelt what she already had underneath the beef and juniper. Jacques Le Bœuf. Suddenly that foul stench was everywhere. 'Come.' Now I was pulling her along. We reached the rue des Samaritaines and were ducking into it when I heard Jacques call, 'Christine!'

'Run,' I whispered, and put my arm round her shoulders. We stumbled over the uneven stones. 'This way.' I pulled her to the left. 'The Sablon's too far. Let's go to the Chapelle instead. He's not likely to look there.'

We reached the church and ducked inside. I pulled Aliénor into the Chapel of Our Lady of Solitude and pushed her to her knees where a pillar would block Jacques Le Bœuf's view if he came in. I knelt and whispered a prayer, then sat back on my heels. If it hadn't been Jacques we were running from, I might have laughed then, as we must have looked comical. But I did not. Aliénor's face was full of woe.

'Maman,' she whispered, 'please don't make me go to him. I would rather join a convent than live with that smell.'

That smell—of the fermented sheep's piss they soak the woad in to fix the colour—is what has kept woad dyers marrying their cousins for many generations. In Aliénor Jacques Le Bœuf must see fresh blood as much as a dowry and a tie to the workshop of a fine *lissier*.

I sighed. 'All men have faults, but that is nothing compared with all that you get from them—food and clothing, a house, a bed. Jacques Le Bœuf will give you all of those things and you should thank God that you have them.' I sounded more forceful than I felt.

'I do, but . . . why shouldn't I have a man more to my liking, as other women do? No one else wants him, the smelly brute. Why should I?' She shuddered, her body rippling with disgust. Hers would not be a happy bed with Jacques Le Bœuf. It was hard to think of his blue hands on my daughter's body without shuddering myself.

'It's a good business match,' I said. 'If you marry Jacques you will help his woad business and your father's workshop. Your father and I married so that our fathers' workshops would be combined. My father

had no son and chose Georges as his own by having him marry me. That hasn't stopped us from making a good marriage.'

'Mine is not a business match,' Aliénor said. 'You know it's not, Maman. You could have married me to any other business yet you would have me be with the one man with so many faults of his own that he will overlook mine.'

'That's not true,' I said, though it was. 'Anyone can see how useful you are to us, that your blindness doesn't stop you from keeping a house and helping in the workshop and growing your garden.'

'I've tried so hard,' Aliénor muttered, 'but in the end it's made no difference. What man would choose a blind girl over someone with eyes that aren't broken? Jacques Le Bœuf and I are what is left when the barrel is empty. That is why we are meant to have each other.'

I said nothing. She had done my arguing for me, though she did not look persuaded. I placed my hand over hers. 'Nothing's decided,' I said. 'I will talk to your father. Anyway, we need you for these new tapestries; we can't spare you just yet. *Tiens*, Jacques must be gone by now. Let's get to the baker's house before they eat our pie.'

The baker was home already, and the family sitting down to eat. I only got his wife to sell us a pie by promising her a basket of peas from Aliénor's garden. There were no beef pies left, only capon. Georges does not like those so much.

When we were close to our house, Aliénor shied like a horse and clutched my arm. The sheep's piss stench was there—Jacques Le Bœuf must have been coming to see Georges when he first spied us.

'Go and stay with the neighbours,' I said. 'I'll come and get you when he's gone.' I led her to the door of the cloth weaver two houses from us and she slipped inside.

Jacques was drinking beer with Georges in the garden. Unless it is very cold we always take him there when he visits. I suppose he must be used to such treatment. 'Hello, Jacques,' I said, stepping into the garden to greet him and trying not to gag.

'You ran away from me just now,' he rumbled. 'Why did you and the girl run away?'

'I don't know what you mean. Aliénor and I were just going to the Chapelle to pray before we stopped at the baker's house. We had to hurry before the baker shut, so we were running, but not from you. You will stay to dinner, *bien sûr*—there's pie.'

'You ran away from me,' Jacques repeated. 'You shouldn't have done that. Now, where's the girl?'

'She's out . . . visiting.'

'*Bien*. I want to talk to you about your pitiful order for blue in these tapestries.' Jacques Le Bœuf gestured at Sound. 'Look at that—hardly any blue there, especially with all those flowers. You told me there would be much more blue in these tapestries—half the ground would be blue for grass. Now it's just islands of blue, and all this red instead.'

'The designs have changed since we first spoke,' Georges said. 'That often happens. I never promised you a certain amount of blue.'

'You misled me, and you'll have to make up for it,' Jacques said.

'Will you take your pie out here?' I cut in. 'It is nice to eat outside sometimes. Madeleine, bring out the pie,' I called inside.

'Jacques, you know I can't guarantee quantities,' Georges said. 'That's not how the business works. Things change as we go.'

'I'm not supplying you with any blue until you make me a promise.'

'Promise what?'

'Your daughter.'

Georges glanced at me. 'We haven't discussed it with Aliénor yet.'

'What's to discuss? You give me her dowry and she'll be my wife. That's all there is to say to her.'

'We need Aliénor for a while,' I interrupted. 'These tapestries are the biggest commission we've taken on, we need everyone working.'

Jacques Le Bœuf ignored me. 'Make your daughter my wife and I'll supply you with blue wool,' he said as Madeleine brought out the pie and a knife. She was holding her breath so that she wouldn't breathe in his smell, but she let it out in a surprised huff when she heard what he said. I frowned and shook my head at her as she dropped the pie on the table and hurried back inside.

'Christine and I need to discuss it,' Georges said. 'I'll give you my answer tomorrow.'

'Good,' Jacques said. He picked up the knife and cut himself a large wedge. 'You give me the girl and you'll get your blue. And don't try to go to other woad dyers; they know me better than they know you.' Of course they did—they were all cousins.

'I have work to do,' Georges said, getting up. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

Jacques Le Bœuf took a great gulp of pie—he didn't seem insulted by Georges walking away from him as he ate.

I backed away as well, and went to find Madeleine. She was bent over the lentil pot, her face red from scrubbing. 'Don't you say a word to Aliénor,' I hissed. 'She doesn't need to know about this just now. Besides, nothing has been decided.'

Madeleine glanced up at me, tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear, and began scrubbing again.

Jacques ate half of our pie before he left. I didn't touch it—I had no stomach for it now.

Aliénor didn't say anything when I fetched her from the neighbours. She went straight to her garden and began picking peas for the baker. I was glad, for I don't know what I would have said.

Later, she offered to take the peas to the baker's wife on her own. When she was gone I pulled Georges to the far end of the garden by the rose-covered trellis so that no one could hear us. Nicolas and Philippe were working side by side on Smell.

'What are we going to do about Jacques, then?' I demanded.

Georges sighed. 'We will have to let him have her.'

'The other day you were joking that the smell would kill her.'

'If I don't get that blue soon we'll run late already and be fined by Léon. Jacques knows that. He has me by the balls.'

I thought of Aliénor's shudders in the Chapelle. 'She detests him.'

'Christine, you know this is the best offer Aliénor will get. She's lucky to have it. Jacques will look after her. He's not a bad man, apart from the smell, and she'll get used to that.'

'Jacques will beat her,' I said.

'Not if she obeys him.'

I snorted. How could Georges agree to such a man for his daughter? Even as I thought it, I knew there was little I could say. I knew my husband, and he had already decided. 'We can't spare her now,' I said. 'We need her to sew on these tapestries.'

'She won't go yet, but she could when the tapestries are almost done. You could finish the sewing. By the end of next year, let us say.'

'She must know nothing about this for the moment,' I said at last. 'You make it clear to Jacques that he can't go about bragging of his wife-to-be. If he says a word the betrothal is broken.'

Georges nodded.

Perhaps that was cruel of me. But I couldn't bear to live with Aliénor's sad face for the next year and a half while she waited for what she dreaded. Best for everyone if she knew only when it was time.

We walked back through Aliénor's garden, which was bright with flowers. Who will look after this when she's gone? I thought.

'Philippe, stop your painting now—I need you to draw on the warp once we've put the cartoon underneath,' Georges said, stepping ahead of me. He went up to Sound. '*Tiens*, help me take this inside, if it's dry. Georges, Luc!' he called. He sounded stern and brisk—Georges's way of leaving behind our talk.

Philippe dropped his brush into a pot of water. The boys hurried

out from the workshop. Georges Le Jeune climbed up a ladder to detach the cartoon from the wall. Then, one man at each corner, they carried it inside to the loom.

With the cartoon gone the garden suddenly felt empty. Nicolas and I were alone. He was painting the Lady's hands now as she held a carnation. In his own hand he too held one. He did not turn round. He was holding his back and head very stiff and straight—from anger, I realised after a moment. I gazed at the white carnation between his fingers. Aliénor grew them near the roses. He must have come over to pick one while Georges and I were back there talking.

'Don't think badly of us,' I said softly. 'It will be best for her.'

Nicolas didn't answer immediately, but held his brush up to the cloth. 'Brussels is beginning to bore me,' he said. 'Its ways are too boorish for me. I'll be glad to leave. The sooner the better.' He glanced at the carnation he held, threw it down and crushed it under his heel.

PARIS AND CHELLES

Eastertide 1491

Nicolas des Innocents

I didn't expect ever to see the tapestries or their designs again. When I paint a miniature or a shield, or design stained glass, I see it only as I work on it. What happens after doesn't concern me. It's like that with women: I will plough one and enjoy it, then find another and enjoy that. I don't look back. No, that is not wholly true. There is one I do look back to, one I think of all the time, though I've not had her.

Those Brussels tapestries stayed with me. Most work I quickly forget, but I could recall many details in the cartoons—the long orange sleeves of the servant in Sound, the flip of the Lady's scarf as the wind caught it in Taste, the darkness in the mirror in Sight.

I had proven something with those designs. Léon Le Vieux now treated me with more respect, almost as if we were equals rather than a wealthy merchant tolerating a lowly painter. He shrewdly held on to the paintings I'd made of the six Ladies, making excuses to Jean Le Viste about returning them. He showed them to other noblemen, who told others, and from the talk came demands for more tapestries. I designed other unicorn tapestries though I was always careful to make them different from the Le Viste Ladies. Léon was gleeful. 'See how excited people are now, just with the small designs,' he would say. 'Wait

till they see the real tapestries hanging in Jean Le Viste's Grande Salle. You'll have work for the rest of your days.' And money for his pocket, he might have added. I was happy, though. If things continued this well I would never have to paint another shield or coach door.

One day I went to Léon's house to discuss a new tapestry commission. Not of unicorns but of falconers out hunting. As we talked I sketched a falcon's wings and tail. Léon sat back, watching me work. 'The roads between Paris and Brussels are clear now and I've had word of your tapestries from a merchant I know,' he told me. 'He stopped in at Georges's workshop.'

Léon and I had not spoken of the tapestries in months. By the beginning of Advent the roads were too poor for most to make the journey easily between Paris and Brussels. Léon had no more word of their progress and I had stopped asking. 'What did he say?'

'They finished the first two after Christmas and began the next two at the Epiphany—the two long ones. They've fallen behind on them, though. Some in the house were ill.'

'Who?'

'Georges Le Jeune and one of the outside weavers brought in for the work. They're better now, but time was lost.'

I was relieved to hear it was not Aliénor. That surprised me. 'How do the tapestries look?'

'Georges showed him the first two—Sound and Smell. The merchant said they are very fine.'

I drew the falcon's head and beak. 'What about the two they're making now? Where have they got to?'

'They were weaving the dog that sits on the train of the Lady's dress in Taste. In A Mon Seul Désir they have reached the servant.'

I tried to remember the details of the designs. I was surprised to have forgotten that a dog sat on the Lady's dress. 'Léon, get out the paintings. I want to look at them.'

Léon chuckled. 'You haven't asked to see them in some time,' he said as he took his keys from his belt and unlocked a teak chest. He pulled them out and laid them on the table.

I looked at the dog in Taste and began to estimate how long it would take the weavers to reach the Lady's face. Claude's face.

It was months since I'd seen Claude Le Viste. I hadn't been inside the house on the rue du Four after returning from Brussels in the summer. There were no other commissions for me there, and the family was at their château near Lyons. At Michaelmas I heard they'd returned, and I sometimes stood near Saint-Germain-des-Prés, waiting

for a glimpse of Claude. One day I saw her on the rue du Four with her mother and her ladies. As she passed, I began to walk alongside on the other side of the road, hoping she would see me.

She did. She stopped then as if she'd stubbed her toe. The ladies poured around either side of her until there was just her and Béatrice left standing in the road. Claude waved on her lady and knelt as if to adjust her shoe. I let a coin drop near her and stepped over to pick it up. As I knelt next to her we grinned at each other. I did not dare to touch her, though—a man like me does not touch a girl like her in the street.

'I've wanted to see you,' Claude whispered.

'And me you. Will you come to me?'

'I'll try, but—'

Before she could finish or I could tell her where I lodged, Béatrice and the groom escorting them rushed up to us. 'Go away,' Béatrice hissed, 'before Dame Geneviève sees you!' The groom grabbed me and hustled me away from Claude, who remained kneeling in the street, her light eyes gazing after me.

Léon reached over to gather up the paintings. 'Are you going to draw something now or not?'

I drew quickly—falcons attacking a heron as men and ladies looked on, with dogs running along the bottom. I had designed enough tapestries now that it all came easily to me. Thanks to Aliénor's garden, I could even draw the *millefleurs* accurately.

THAT NIGHT I DREAMT of a strip of tapestry with Claude's face on it. The next day I found a reason to go to Saint-Germain-des-Prés—a friend there could tell me more about hunting with falcons. I walked down the rue du Four and looked up at the Le Viste house. The windows were shuttered and, though I waited, no one came in or out.

My friend was not in either, and I wandered back towards the city. As I passed through the city walls at the Porte Saint Germain and pushed through the market stalls surrounding it, I saw a familiar woman, frowning at some heads of lettuce. She was not so fat now.

'Marie-Céleste?' I called.

She turned and looked at me without surprise as I stepped up to her.

'What do you want?' she demanded.

'To see you smile.'

Marie-Céleste grunted and turned back to the lettuces.

'Are you buying those for the Le Vistes?'

'Don't work there now. You should know that.'

'Why not?'

'I had to go away to have the baby, didn't I. Claude was to put in a word for me, but when I came back there was another girl in my place and mistress didn't want to know.'

Hearing Claude's name made me shiver with desire. I tried to think of something else. '*Alors*, how is the baby?'

Marie-Céleste's hands stopped moving for a moment. 'Gave her to the nuns.' She picked up a lettuce and shook it.

'What? Why?'

'I had to go back to my job, to keep my mother. She's too old and sick to look after a baby. Then I didn't even have a job to come back to.'

I was quiet, thinking about a daughter off somewhere with nuns. It wasn't what I expected of any children I might have.

'What did you name her?'

'Claude.'

I slapped Marie-Céleste so hard the lettuce flew from her hand.

'*Holà!*' cried the lettuce seller. 'You drop it, you pay for it.'

Marie-Céleste began to cry. She grabbed her basket and ran.

I scooped up the lettuce and tossed it on top of the others before running after her. When I caught up, she was red in the face from running and crying at the same time. I pulled her into an alley.

'Why did you call my daughter that?' I asked in a low voice. It was strange using the word daughter.

Marie-Céleste looked at me wearily. Her doughy face looked like a bun with two currants pressed into it, and her dark hair dangled loose from her cap. I wondered why I had ever wanted to bed her.

'I told Claude I would,' she said. 'I was so grateful to her offering to set me straight with the mistress. But then she didn't—when I spoke to Dame Geneviève she swore Mademoiselle hadn't said a thing. Mistress thought I'd run off and that was that. So the baby has Mademoiselle's name for nothing. Lucky for me I got another place, with a family on the rue des Cordeliers. The de Bellevilles. They entertain the Le Viste ladies sometimes.'

'The Le Viste ladies come to you? Which ones visit?'

'Usually Claude comes with Dame Geneviève,' Marie-Céleste said. 'There's a daughter her age she likes to see.'

'Do they come often?'

Marie-Céleste furrowed her brow. 'What do you care?'

I shrugged. 'Just curious. I've worked for Monseigneur Le Viste, as you know, and wondered what his women are like.'

A cunning look came over Marie-Céleste's face. 'I suppose you want to come and see me there, don't you?'

I gaped at her, amazed that she was flirting with me after all that had happened. But then, she could be useful to me. I smiled and brushed a feather from her shoulder. 'Might do.'

She described the house on the rue des Cordeliers.

'Maybe I'll come when the Le Vistes are visiting,' I told her. 'Then I can have a look to satisfy my curiosity.'

'If you like. *En fait*, they're visiting the day after tomorrow, I heard my mistress say.'

THE DE BELLEVILLE HOUSE was not as grand as the Le Vistes'. I studied it while I waited across the road for Marie-Céleste, wondering if I would see Claude go in. I would try to see her for a moment to arrange another meeting. I'd even paid a man to write a note for me; Claude would be able to read it even if I couldn't.

Marie-Céleste opened the front door and beckoned to me. I ran across and slipped inside. She led me through the kitchen, where the cook glared at me as he squatted by a pot on the fire. 'Don't make noise or there'll be trouble,' he growled.

I couldn't remember if Marie-Céleste had been noisy when she opened her legs, but I played along, leering at him as we went out of the back door. 'Idiot,' the cook muttered.

I didn't have time to understand the warning behind that word. As I stepped into the back garden, I heard a sound behind me and took such a blow to my head that I saw stars. I staggered, and couldn't even turn round to see my assailant before I was kicked in the back and fell to the ground. Then he began kicking me in the side and head. I managed to look up through the blood trickling into my eyes and saw Marie-Céleste standing with her arms crossed. I got enough breath back to groan before the man kicked it out of me again. After one or two kicks to the head everything went black. When I woke I heard a high-pitched whine, like a rabbit caught in a trap. 'Be quiet,' Marie-Céleste hissed, and I realised the sound came from me.

'Kick him in the balls,' I heard Marie-Céleste say to my attacker. 'Kick him so he'll not get anyone else with child.'

As the man readied himself for the *coup de grâce*, I closed my eyes. Then I heard the creak of a window shutter swinging out. I opened my eyes and looked up into Claude's face peeking over a windowsill high above me. Her eyes were wide and clear.

'*Arrêtez!*' Marie-Céleste yelled. The man paused, looked up, then in a flash was gone. I did see enough of his face, though, to recognise the Le Viste steward.

'What's happened? Is that you, Marie-Céleste?' Claude called. 'And'—she started—'Nicolas?'

Other faces appeared by Claude's—Geneviève de Nanterre, Béatrice, and what must be Madame and Mademoiselle de Belleville. It was so peculiar seeing their heads huddled together peering down at me that I closed my eyes again. When I opened them, all the heads were gone save Claude's. She gazed down at me. We smiled at each other. Then she disappeared suddenly, as if she had been pulled away from the window.

'Don't you say a thing,' Marie-Céleste hissed. 'You was visiting me and he tried to rob you.'

I lay still. If I said what had really happened, Marie-Céleste might tell Béatrice we had a daughter, and she would tell Claude. I didn't want Claude to know.

Béatrice appeared with a bowl of water and a cloth. She knelt by me, took my head in her lap, and began mopping the blood from my face. Just the moving of my head made me feel queasy and I had to close my eyes.

When Marie-Céleste told her story about a man setting on me and trying to rob me, Béatrice said nothing. That made Marie-Céleste frantic—she began to spin a more and more complicated web and she got herself into a terrible tangle.

'Go and get some warm water,' Béatrice interrupted.

As Marie-Céleste ran inside, I opened my eyes and looked up into Béatrice's brown eyes. Turning my head, I spat from my mouth two teeth. They missed Béatrice's moiré skirt and bounced on the ground.

'What have you done to get such a beating?' Béatrice asked softly. 'Whatever it was, you probably deserved it.'

'Béatrice, put your hand in my pocket. Please. There's something there I want you to deliver.'

She hesitated, then reached in and pulled out the note from my doublet. There was blood on it.

'Give it to Claude.'

'You know I can't do that,' she whispered.

'Yes, you can. Please. She would want you to. You are her woman, *n'est-ce pas*? You must do what's best for her.' I gazed into her eyes. Women have often said my eyes are what they like best about me.

Béatrice's face softened. She stuffed the note up her sleeve.

I was abed three days before I could move properly again. My joints were stiff, my eyes black, my nose swollen, and a rib was cracked so that a sharp pain flashed through me when I tried to move.

I was waiting for Claude to come. On the fourth day I heard steps on the stairs, but it was not she who opened the door. Instead Léon Le Vieux stood in the doorway.

'You've been a naughty lad, haven't you?'

I started to protest, then stopped. Léon seemed to know everything. There was no point in lying to him. I lay back. 'I did take quite a beating.'

Léon chuckled. 'Get some rest now. You need to be well soon—for your pains I'm sending you on a pilgrimage.'

I stared at him. 'What? Where?'

Léon smiled. 'North. To see a Brussels relic.'

Geneviève de Nanterre

For the past year I've kept Claude under close guard, yet the man I was guarding her from came to the very house we were visiting. How could Claude have arranged such a meeting under our noses?

I summoned Béatrice to my chamber and when she came in she dropped to her knees and began to speak before I could say a word. 'Madame, she says she knew nothing of Nicolas des Innocents being at the rue des Cordeliers. Claude swears by Our Lady that she's had no contact with him.'

'And you believe her?'

'She can't have, I've been with her all these months. Madame, she has not seen Nicolas. I swear to you.' Béatrice reached into her sleeve and pulled out a piece of paper. There was blood on it, as well as on her sleeve and bodice. 'Perhaps this will tell us how it came about. He gave this to me to give to her.'

I took the paper and carefully unfolded it. The blood was dry now.

Mon Amour—

Come to me—the room above Le Coq d'Or, off the rue Saint Denis. Any night, as soon as you can. *C'est mon seul désir.*

Nicolas

The scream tore my throat out. Béatrice fell backwards in fright, and my ladies all stumbled to their feet.

I couldn't help it. Seeing my own words—for I knew at once that he was echoing me—written on a bit of bloody paper in a crude hand, by some drunkard sneering in a tavern, was too much to bear.

Claude would pay for it. If I couldn't have *mon seul désir*, I would be sure that she didn't either.

'Go and wash your dress,' I said to Béatrice. 'It looks slovenly.'

She stared at me, then got to her feet.

When she was gone I said to my ladies, 'Come change my dress and do my hair. I am going to see my lord.'

I had not said a word to Jean about the troubles with our daughter over the past year. I knew what he would do: blame me for not looking after Claude well enough. Now I had to break my silence.

Jean was in his chamber with the steward, going over the household accounts. I curtsied low beside the table where they sat. 'Monseigneur, I would like to speak with you. Alone.'

'Can't it wait? Steward's been out and we've only just sat down.'

'I'm sorry, Monseigneur, but it is urgent.'

After a moment Jean said to the steward, 'Wait outside.'

The steward nodded, bowed briefly to me and left us.

'What is it, Geneviève? I'm very busy.'

I would have to tread carefully. 'It's about Claude. She is to be betrothed next year, and you will decide soon who will be her lord and husband. I've begun preparing her for her new life—teaching her how to keep herself and wear her clothes, to handle servants and household matters. She is doing well in all of these things.'

Jean did not speak but tapped a finger on the table.

I began to walk up and down. 'There is one area, however, where she needs more guidance than I can give her. She has not yet truly absorbed the ways of the Church.'

Jean flicked his hand. I know that impatient gesture, have seen it when men speak to him of things that matter little to him.

'It's important for a noblewoman to have strong faith in the Church,' I said firmly. 'She must be spiritually as well as physically pure. Any true nobleman will expect that of her.'

Jean scowled, and I wondered if I had gone too far. He does not like to be reminded that some don't think him truly noble. 'Make your point,' he said.

'Claude is restless and can be difficult at times,' I said. 'I think it would do her good to stay in a convent until her betrothal.'

'A convent? My daughter is no nun.'

'Of course not. But a stay there will help her to know the value of Mass, of prayers, confession, communion. Now she mumbles her prayers and the priest says she makes up her confession.'

Jean looked scornful, and I resorted to something closer to the

truth. 'There is a wildness in her that no husband will like to see. I fear it will bring her harm. The convent will settle her. There is one outside of Paris at Chelles where I'm sure the nuns can help her.'

Jean shuddered. 'I've never liked nuns. My sister became one.'

'She won't become a nun. She'll be safe there and can get up to no mischief. The walls are very high.'

I should not have added that last part. Jean sat up straight. 'Has Claude been going out alone?'

'Of course not,' I said. 'But I think she would like to.'

'Why don't you keep a closer eye on her rather than imprison her with nuns? People will think you can't control your daughter, or that there is something wrong with her if you have to hide her away.'

He meant that she might be with child. 'It is not wrong for a lady to stay in a convent before her betrothal. My grandmother did, and my mother too. And Claude may visit us occasionally, for some of the Holy Days, so that people may see there's nothing wrong with her.' I could not keep the scorn from my voice.

Jean just looked at me.

'Or we could bring the betrothal forward if you prefer,' I said quickly, 'if you have finished your talks with the man's family. Do it now rather than next spring.'

'No. It won't look right to rush her marriage so. And the tapestries won't be done until next Easter.'

Those tapestries again. I had to bite my lips to keep from spitting. 'Is it really necessary for the tapestries to hang for the betrothal?'

Jean glanced at my stony face. 'We could bring the betrothal forward a month or two,' he said. 'Isn't there a betrothal day in February?'

'The Feast of St Valentine.'

'Yes. We could have it then. Léon Le Vieux told me that the Brussels workshop is behind in making the tapestries. I'll send him to chivvy them along by cutting off two months—that will get them working harder. Send Claude to me before you take her to the convent.'

I curtsied. 'Yes, my lord.' When I straightened I looked him in the eye. 'Thank you, Jean.'

He nodded, and though he didn't smile at me, his face softened. He is a hard man, but he does listen to me sometimes.

'Who will she marry, Monseigneur?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'That is my business and not for you to be concerned with. Since you did not give me a son, I must choose one.' He turned away then, and the tender moment was lost. Before I left I asked him not to tell Claude where she was going.

When I got back to my chamber I sent for Béatrice again. She appeared in a yellow brocade, which I thought too bright, but at least the artist's blood was not staining it.

'Pack Claude's things,' I said. 'Only her simplest clothes, and no jewels. I am taking you both on a journey.'

'Where to, Madame?' Béatrice sounded fearful.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'Look after Claude well and you will yet have your reward.'

I sent for a groom and told him to make ready my carriage, as well as to send a messenger ahead with news of our visit. Then I sent Claude to her father. I sorely wanted to creep outside his door and listen, but it would not be dignified, and I busied myself instead with my own preparations—changing out of the brocade I had worn for Jean and into the simple dark wool I had worn on Good Friday.

There was a knock on the door and Claude entered. She came straight to me and knelt. 'I'm sorry, Maman. I will do whatever you ask of me.' I heard fear in her voice, and some obedience, yet underneath it there was still defiance.

I accompanied them in the carriage. Claude sat far from me, with Béatrice squeezed between us. We spoke little. My carriage is not made for long journeys, but for simple jaunts across the city. We were jolted often, and at times I wondered if the wheels would fall off. I could not sleep, though Claude and Béatrice managed a little once it was dark.

When we arrived at the town walls it was almost daybreak. Lauds would soon be said. Claude had never been to Chelles, and didn't react when we stopped outside the small door set in the high wall. Béatrice recognised it at once, though, and sat up, her face wrinkled with concern as I climbed out and rang the bell next to the door.

Only when a woman opened the door and Claude saw the white cloth framing her face in the torchlight did she suddenly understand. 'No!' she cried, pushing herself into the corner of the carriage. I ignored her and spoke in a low voice to the nun.

Then I heard a noise, and Béatrice cried, 'Madame, she has run off!'

'Go and get her,' I said in a low voice to the grooms, who were wiping down the horses. One of them ran down the road after her. In a few minutes he was back, carrying Claude in his arms. 'Carry her inside,' I said. With the nun holding high her torch, we made our sorry entrance into the convent.

They took Claude away, Béatrice trailing behind like a chick that had lost its mother. I joined the nuns in the chapel for Lauds, sinking

to my knees with a lightness I had not felt for some time. Afterwards I joined Abbess Catherine de Ligniéres for a glass of wine before having a short sleep. I slept better on the narrow straw pallet than I ever do at the rue du Four in my big bed with my ladies close by.

I did not see Claude again before I left. I did send for Béatrice, though, who looked worn and subdued. We walked around the cloisters and then into the central garden, where nuns were at work planting and weeding, digging and tying. Standing in that peaceful garden in the morning sun, with nuns quietly busy around me, I felt a stab of envy.

'Look at this garden, Béatrice,' I said. 'It's like Paradise.'

Béatrice did not respond.

'How is Claude?'

Béatrice shrugged. She was angry at me, though of course she couldn't say so. 'She hasn't spoken since she arrived. Nor has she eaten—not that she missed much.'

It is true that the gruel here is thin, the bread hard. 'She will get used to it in time,' I said gently. 'This is the best place for her, you know. She'll be much happier by Candlemas.'

Béatrice gasped. 'Candlemas? We're to stay here until then?'

I smiled. 'It will go by faster than you think. And if you are both good and behave yourselves—both of you,' I repeated so that she would understand, 'I will arrange a marriage for you at the end of it.'

Poor Béatrice had a split face—a sad mouth but hopeful eyes.

'You know that you will be well looked after here,' I said. 'Be cheerful with Claude, obey the Abbess, and all will be well.'

With that I left her in the lovely garden, tearing myself away to get in my carriage for the long journey back to the rue du Four. I confess I cried as I watched the fields pass, and again when we reached the Paris gates. I did not want to go back to the rue du Four. But I must.

At the house I stopped the grooms before they took the horses away, and paid them handsomely to keep their mouths shut about where we had been. No one but they and Jean knew where Claude was—I didn't want Nicolas finding out and pestering the nuns there. I had been careful but I was still uneasy. I didn't trust him. I saw the way he looked at my daughter as he lay bloodied on the ground—a look I had never had from Jean. It made my gut turn from jealousy.

As I stepped across the courtyard I had an idea, and hurried back to the stables. 'I'm going out again,' I said to the surprised grooms. 'Take me to the rue des Rosiers.'

Léon Le Vieux was also surprised—it is rare for a noblewoman to visit him, and alone. However, he was very gracious, making me

comfortable by the fire. He has a fine house, filled with rugs and carved chests. His wife brought us sweet wine. She looked happy enough, and there was silk woven into the wool of her dress.

'How do you fare, Dame Geneviève?' he asked as we sat. 'And Claude? And Jeanne and Petite Geneviève?' Léon never forgets to ask after each of my daughters.

'I need your help, Léon,' I said. 'Have you heard from my husband?'

'About the tapestries? Yes, this morning. I was just arranging how I might go to Brussels when you arrived.'

'I would ask something of you. It may be in your favour as well. Send that Nicolas des Innocents to Brussels instead.'

Léon paused, his glass half raised to his lips. 'That is an unexpected request. May I ask why, Dame Geneviève?'

I wanted to tell someone. Léon is discreet and I have always liked him. So I told him everything. 'I've taken her to Chelles,' I finished, 'where she'll stay until her betrothal. No one knows she's there but you and me and Jean. But I don't trust Nicolas. I want him out of Paris for a time until it's certain he won't find her. You have dealings with him—tell him to go to Brussels in your stead.'

Léon Le Vieux listened impassively. '*Alors*, I will do as you ask. It suits me as well—a trip to Brussels now is not so convenient for me.' He grunted. 'These tapestries seem to be causing trouble, *n'est-ce pas*?'

I sighed. 'Indeed—more than any tapestry is worth!'

Claude Le Viste

At first I would not leave my room, nor eat, nor speak to anyone except Béatrice—and very little to her either, once I'd looked in my bags. She had packed my plainest dresses—no silk, no brocade, no velvet. When I accused her of knowing where we were going and not telling me, she denied it. I do not believe her.

It was easy enough not to eat—the food they gave me wasn't fit for pigs. The room, though, was so small and plain that after only a day I longed to be free of it. There was room only for a straw pallet and a chamber pot, and the stone walls were bare except for a small wooden crucifix. Béatrice couldn't fit her pallet in there—she slept outside my door. I've never slept on straw before. It is prickly and noisy and I miss my soft feathers at home. Papa would be so angry if he could see his daughter sleeping on straw.

Béatrice had brought paper and a quill and ink, and I thought of sending word to Papa to come and get me. He'd said nothing about convents when he spoke to me in his chamber, but only reminded me that I carried his name and that I was to obey Maman in everything. But I don't think he meant I was to be shut up in a convent.

I am angry with everyone—Papa, Maman, Béatrice—even Nicolas for playing a part in trapping me here, even if he doesn't know it.

By the fourth morning I was so bored with my room that I broke my silence with Béatrice and begged her to find a messenger. She came back later and told me the Abbess said I am neither to send nor receive messages. So I truly am imprisoned. I did cry then, very bitter tears.

It was sunny out, and there was a garden in the cloisters that was much preferable to my tiny room. I sat on one of the stone benches set round the sides of the cloisters, not caring if the sun burned me. A few nuns were working in the garden and they gave me curious looks.

Then I heard a noise I had not expected ever to hear in a convent. From somewhere inside a child laughed. After a moment little pattering steps came from the door nearest me, and a tiny girl appeared in the archway. She was wearing a grey dress and a white cap, and reminded me of Petite Geneviève when she was much younger. She was really still a baby and lurched along with uneven steps. She had a funny little face, very determined and serious. Her hair was lovely, a dark red like chestnuts, in big tangled ringlets.

'Come here, *ma petite*,' I called. 'Come here and sit with me.'

Behind the girl a nun appeared in her long white habit. They wear white here at Chelles. At least I'm not surrounded by black—black does not suit a woman's face. 'There you are, you naughty thing,' the nun scolded. 'Come here.' The girl paid no attention. She tottered out of the door and tripped down the step, sprawling into the cloisters, her arms before her.

'Oh!' I cried, and ran over to her. I needn't have bothered. The girl hopped up as if nothing had happened and ran along one side of the cloisters square.

The nun did not follow but stood looking me up and down. 'So you've come out now,' she said sourly.

'I won't be here for long,' I said quickly. 'I'll be going home soon.'

The nun did not respond but gazed after the girl, who had tottered along two lengths of the square and was rounding the third corner. '*Attention, mon petit chou!*' the nun called. 'Watch where you run!'

Her words seemed to do just what they were meant to prevent. The girl fell again, and this time lay still and began to cry. The nun ran

round the square. When she got to the girl she stood over her and began to scold. Clearly she was not used to children. I strode over to them, then knelt and put my arms round the girl, lifting her onto my lap as I had done with Petite Geneviève many times. 'There now,' I said, patting her arms and knees. 'There now, that must have hurt. Where does it hurt? Your hands? Your knees?'

The girl kept crying, and I wrapped my arms tight round her and rocked her back and forth until she was quiet. The nun went on scolding. 'Really you have been very silly, running so fast when you shouldn't. You'll be on your knees doing penance during Sext.'

I snorted at the thought of trying to get such a small girl to pray for forgiveness. She didn't look much older than a year. She was like a little doll folded into my lap.

'Shush-shush,' I whispered, turning my back on the nun. 'Shush-shush.' I began to sing a song Marie-Céleste had taught me.

'I am so gay, so sweet, so pleasing,
such a young little maid of not yet fifteen years.
My little breasts are budding as they should.
I should be learning about love and amorous ways,
but I am in prison.
May God curse the one who put me there!'

The girl had stopped crying and made little noises in between her sniffles, as if she too were trying to sing but didn't know the words. It was very pleasant, rocking and singing taunting words that the nun could hear. The song might as well have been written for me.

I heard steps behind us and knew it was Béatrice, my jailer.

'Don't sing that song!' she hissed.

I ignored her. 'Do you want to run again?' I said to the girl. 'Shall we run together? Come, let's run all round the cloisters as fast as we can.' I set her on her feet, took her hand and began to pull her along. Her squeals and my shouts echoed in the arches of the cloisters. Nuns appeared in doorways and windows to stare at us. Even the Abbess came out and stood watching us with her arms crossed over her bosom. I caught the girl up in my arms and ran and ran, once, twice, five times round the cloisters, shouting all the way, and no one stopped us.

In the end it was not a person who stopped us but a bell. When it rang the nuns immediately disappeared. 'Sext,' the nun next to Béatrice announced as I ran by, before going off herself. Béatrice looked after the nun, then at me. I ran still faster, the girl jiggling in my

arms. When I got all the way round the cloisters a sixth time, Béatrice had gone too and we were alone. I dropped onto a bench and set the girl down next to me. She immediately laid her head in my lap. Her face was flushed, and after a moment she was asleep.

'That's why you were crying, *chérie*,' I whispered, stroking her ringlets. 'You need sleep, not prayers. Those silly nuns don't know anything about little girls and what they need.'

At first I was glad to sit on the bench with her on my lap in the sun, left alone with a garden to look at. But soon it grew hot and as I wore no hat I worried the sun would bring out freckles on my face. I began to wish someone would come along that I could hand the girl to, but there was no one. They were still at their prayers.

I didn't know what else to do with the little thing, so I gathered her up and carried her to my room. She didn't wake when I laid her on my pallet. I searched in my bag for a bit of embroidery, then went back out and sat on another bench in the shade.

Béatrice once told me that Maman has long wanted to join Chelles. I had never thought much of that until I was here. Now I can't see Maman hoeing among the leeks and cabbages, nor scurrying to prayers eight times a day, nor living in a plain cell on straw. Maman thinks convent life is much like her visits here, when the Abbess pampers her, preparing lavish dishes from food the convent would normally sell at market. I expect there is a lovely room for her to stay in too, full of cushions and tapestries. If Maman were to join and become a bride of Christ, the convent would receive a large dowry. And so the Abbess is very kind to Maman and the rich women who visit.

There are no cushions on my seats, no tapestries to warm the walls. Wooden crosses will have to satisfy me, rough wool and plain shoes, pottage without spices and bread made from coarse brown flour. All this I had worked out for myself after only four days at the convent.

I frowned at my embroidery. I was meant to be making a falcon for a cushion cover, but it looked like a snake with wings. And the threads had become all tangled. I sighed and set it down.

Then I heard footsteps, and someone said, 'Oh!' I looked up. Marie-Céleste stood across the cloisters from me, looking very confused. I sat up straight. 'What are you doing here?' I asked her.

Marie-Céleste curtsied, and then she began to cry.

'Come here, Marie-Céleste.'

She reached me and curtsied again, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

'Have you come to get me out?' I asked eagerly, for I could not see why else she would be here.

Marie-Céleste looked even more confused. 'You, Mademoiselle? I didn't know you was here. I've come to see my daughter.'

'Hasn't my father sent you? Or Maman?'

Marie-Céleste shook her head. 'I don't work at your house now, Mademoiselle. You know that, and you know why too.'

'Why else would you come here, if not for me?' I could not let go of the idea that Marie-Céleste would be my means of escape.

Marie-Céleste looked round. 'My daughter—they said she was out here. I know I'm not meant to come, and she don't even think of me as Maman, but I can't help it.'

I gazed at her in surprise. 'The girl is your daughter?'

Marie-Céleste looked equally surprised. 'Didn't you know? They didn't tell you? Her name is Claude, you know—like yours.'

'They tell me nothing here. *Alors*, she's asleep in there.' I pointed down a passageway towards my room. 'Four doors along.'

Marie-Céleste nodded. 'I'll just have a look at her, then, Mademoiselle. *Pardon*.' She stepped across the cloisters.

As I waited for her I thought back to the day Marie-Céleste had said she would name her baby after me. Then I remembered something. I had been meant to tell Maman that Marie-Céleste had gone to tend to her mother, and would be back. I had forgotten. Maman had been so awful to me then and every day since that I spoke to her as little as I could. And so Marie-Céleste did not work for us any more. I am not used to feeling guilty, but now I felt sick with it.

When she came back out I moved over on the bench. 'Come and sit with me,' I said, patting the space beside me.

Marie-Céleste looked uneasy. 'I should be getting back. My mother didn't know I was coming here, and she'll be expecting me.'

'Just for a moment. You can help me with my sewing. *Regardes*, I'm wearing some of your work.' I smoothed my bodice.

Marie-Céleste sat down warily. She must be angry with me. I would have to make things right if I wanted to get her to help me.

'How do you know this place?' I asked, as if we were good friends chatting. We had been once.

'Been coming since I was a girl. We live close by, and Maman used to work here. She helped in the fields and with the cooking.'

Now I understood. 'And Maman got you from here.'

Marie-Céleste nodded. 'She wanted a new maid and asked the nuns to find one.'

'And you named your baby after me.'

'Yes.' Marie-Céleste looked as if she regretted that, as well she might.

'Has the father seen her?'

'No!' Marie-Céleste shook her head. 'He don't care nothing for me or the baby. He had me once and didn't care what happened after. Then two years later he has the cheek to come round and see me. Wants it again, and won't care again if there's another babe. Well, I showed him, didn't I? Deserved all he got. If you hadn't poked your head out of the window—' She stopped, her eyes suddenly fearful.

Perhaps the convent was already having an effect on me. If I had been anywhere else and discovered such a thing I would have shrieked. Now, though, sitting in that quiet garden, I did not scream, or scratch out Marie-Céleste's eyes, or cry. I would cry later. I simply said very quietly, 'Nicolas des Innocents is Petite Claude's father?'

Marie-Céleste nodded. 'It was only the once, when he came to see your father about some painting. That was all.'

'Then why were you with him in the courtyard the other day? Having him beaten by Papa's steward, it looked to me.'

Marie-Céleste gazed at me fearfully and began to cry again.

I gritted my teeth. 'Stop it. Stop that crying!'

She gulped and swallowed, then wiped her eyes and blew her nose on her sleeve. She looked at me sideways. 'What are you doing here, Mademoiselle? You never said.'

Of course I could say nothing of Nicolas. Marie-Céleste didn't know what I felt for him—or tried to do, and that she had already done. I hated her now, but I could not let her see that. I would have to sound as if I wanted to be here. I picked up my embroidery so that I could keep my eyes on it. 'Maman and Papa decided it would be best for me to spend the last months before my betrothal here, better to learn the ways of the Church.'

I didn't convince Marie-Céleste, I could see that. She rolled her eyes.

'He was asking about you,' she announced suddenly.

'He? Who?' My heart beat faster.

'That bastard artist,' she said. 'Wanted to know when you would visit the de Bellevilles.'

So Nicolas had indeed come to see me at the rue des Cordeliers. I knew it couldn't have been for Marie-Céleste. How could I get word to him through her without her becoming suspicious? She was stupid but she could often guess when I was lying.

From my room we heard a cough and a yelp. Marie-Céleste looked at me anxiously. 'You go to her, Mademoiselle,' she begged.

'But you are her mother!'

'She don't know that. I come to have a look at her but I don't talk to

her or hold her. It hurts too much after.' Marie-Céleste winced and for a moment I felt sorry for her.

I went to the doorway of my room and looked in. Petite Claude was shaking her head, rolling it along the pillow in her sleep. She frowned, then suddenly let go of the dream, and her face relaxed into a smile. Now that I knew, I was amazed I had not seen Nicolas in the girl—her chestnut hair, her strong jaw. When she smiled she looked like him.

'She's fine,' I said when I came back. 'Demons were visiting her in her sleep but they have gone now.' Watching Petite Claude had given me an idea. 'Has Nicolas helped you with the child?'

Marie-Céleste snorted. 'He threw some coins at me. Weren't nothing, though.'

I didn't care what Nicolas did or didn't do for his daughter. As far as I could see, Marie-Céleste had got into her own trouble. I didn't say so, though. 'He should be giving you more than just a few coins,' I said, strolling up and down in front of the bench. 'He has designed tapestries for my father that will bring him money and fame. He should be paying something for Petite Claude. Perhaps I could help you get money from him—so that she may leave here and stay with you.'

'How?' Marie-Céleste asked quickly.

I brushed a fly from my sleeve. 'I could tell him my father won't pay him for the tapestries until he does.'

'Could you really do that, Mademoiselle?'

'I will write a note now, and you can take it to him.'

'Me?' Marie-Céleste looked put out. 'Why don't you, Mademoiselle? Or one of your ladies?' She looked around. 'You must have one with you. Probably Béatrice—your mother always meant her for you. She'll be surprised to be living here again.'

'Again? Has she before?'

Marie-Céleste shrugged. '*Bien sûr*. She grew up here.'

I'd not thought of it before, but Béatrice did seem familiar with the convent—she knew where things were and even some of the nuns.

'She can take the note for you, Mademoiselle,' Marie-Céleste added.

I had forgotten that Marie-Céleste didn't know I was imprisoned here. And she mustn't know. She might not help me to reach Nicolas.

'I'm not meant to leave,' I said. 'Nor Béatrice. It's part of the purification of the soul before the betrothal.'

'But I can't go to him, not after what happened. He might beat me.'

'Leave it in his room, when he's not there,' I suggested. When she continued to look dubious I added, 'Do you want me to tell Papa that you had his steward beat the very artist my father admires?'

Marie-Céleste knew she was trapped. She looked as if she might cry again. 'Give me the note, then,' she mumbled.

'Wait there.' I hurried to my room before she could change her mind. I rummaged through my bag for some paper, then knelt on the floor and quickly wrote a note, telling Nicolas where I was and begging him to rescue me. I had no sealing wax but that did not much matter—Marie-Céleste certainly couldn't read it.

I wasn't quiet enough. As I was finishing, Petite Claude sat up on the pallet and began to cry and rub her eyes. She looked so like Marie-Céleste just then that I wanted to laugh. 'Come, *chérie*,' I whispered, picking her up. 'Come and see your silly mother.'

When we came out, the nuns were coming back from Sext and Marie-Céleste was standing with Béatrice. They jumped apart when I got to them, and Marie-Céleste would not look at Petite Claude. 'Take her for a moment,' I said, handing the baby to a surprised Béatrice. 'I'm going to walk Marie-Céleste to the gate.'

'They won't let you out, you know,' Beatrice said.

I made a face at her and tucked my hand through the crook of Marie-Céleste's arm. When I was sure Béatrice couldn't see I stuffed the note into her hand. 'Do you know where he lives?' I whispered.

Marie-Céleste shook her head.

'Steward will—he sent messengers there for Papa. Find out from him—I'll have him punished if he doesn't tell you.'

Marie-Céleste nodded and pulled her arm from my grasp. She looked weary. The thought of sharing the same man with her disgusted me. How Nicolas could have wanted her, I did not understand.

At the gate a nun handed Marie-Céleste a basket filled with eggs, bread and beans—a charity basket handed out to the poor.

When I got back to Béatrice, I took a squirming Petite Claude in my arms and said, 'You and Marie-Céleste grew up here together.'

Béatrice looked startled, then nodded. 'My mother was widowed when I was young, and joined the convent.'

Petite Claude reached over and pulled a loose strand of Béatrice's hair. Béatrice yelped and Petite Claude and I chortled.

'Are you pleased to be back, then?' I asked.

To my surprise Béatrice looked at me sadly. 'The happiest day of my life was when your mother chose me to come and be her lady. It is a horror for me to have to live here again.'

I set Petite Claude down so that she could totter through the garden. 'Then help me to escape.'

Béatrice shook her head. 'You know it's better for you to be here,

Mademoiselle. Why do you want to wreck the path of your life? You will marry a nobleman and live grandly. There is no greater joy for a woman than to be married, *n'est-ce pas*?'

I picked up the embroidery I had left folded on the bench, the needle threaded through it. I took the needle and jammed it into my finger, just to feel the jolt of pain.

BRUSSELS

May Day 1491—Septuagesima 1492

Georges de la Chapelle

By the time he arrived we had already been working for hours. Silence had settled on the workshop. The women too were quiet, or out—Christine was winding a bobbin with wool thread, Aliénor was working in her garden, and Madeleine was at the market.

I work best when it's quiet. One restless weaver or chattering woman can make the whole shop unable to settle. We need this silence now to do proper work, if we're ever to finish the tapestries in time. Often all I can think of is time: of what has gone and what is left, and what we can do to catch up.

I was sitting between Georges Le Jeune and Luc, finishing the jewels the Lady held in A Mon Seul Désir, while also keeping an eye on my son as he began the hachure on the Lady's shoulder, yellow into red. He was making a good job of it. Really I no longer needed to watch as he did it. It is a habit that's hard to break.

The two hired weavers, a father and son called Joseph and Thomas, were working on *millefleurs* in Taste. They have done *millefleurs* for me before, and are good and quick at them.

It's not easy being the *lissier*. Apart from watching over the others, I weave the hardest parts—the faces and hands, the lion's mane, the unicorn's face and horn, the intricate cloth. I jump between the two tapestries, trying to keep up as the other weavers press on with *millefleurs* and animals, waiting for me to fill the hole in the centre.

Pray, Christine is always saying. But it takes too much time to pray, and I tell her to go to the Sablon and say our prayers for all of us.

Now I heard voices in the kitchen. Madeleine had come back from market and brought a man with her. I thought little of it until she appeared in the workshop with a silly smile on her face. 'The Paris man's here,' she announced.

Our peace was about to be wrecked. Nicolas des Innocents appeared behind her, still splattered with mud from the journey, and grinned at us. 'You're all sitting just as I left you last summer,' he scoffed.

I stood. 'Welcome,' I said. 'Christine, drink for our guest. Small beer.' Although he was a nuisance, I would not have it said of me that I don't welcome visitors, especially those who've travelled far.

Christine nodded at him as she passed. 'So you've come for another look, have you?'

'I have indeed, Madame. I had hoped to see Aliénor dancing round a maypole, but I've arrived too late.'

Christine disappeared inside without telling him we'd worked through May Day, though I had let Luc and Thomas go to the fair.

As Nicolas stepped down into the workshop, he winced as if he'd stepped on a nail. 'Are you all right?' I asked.

Nicolas shrugged. 'A little battered from the journey, that's all.' He turned to Aliénor, who had come in from the garden. 'And you, Aliénor. How do you keep?' When he smiled at her I saw that two side teeth were missing, and there was a trace of bruising round his eye. Either he had fallen off a horse or been in a fight. Perhaps there had been thieves along the road.

'Very well, Monsieur,' Aliénor said, 'but the garden is even better. Come and smell the flowers.'

'In a moment, beauty. I want to have a look at the tapestries first.'

Aliénor smiled wryly. 'You want to see her, don't you? Well, you've come too early.'

I didn't know what she meant until Nicolas looked at the strip of Taste on the loom. 'Ah,' he said, crestfallen. What he could see was a Lady's arm with the hand holding a parakeet, and a fold of an over-dress. And *millefleurs*, of course. He glanced at A Mon Seul Désir, perhaps hoping for a face there. But there was only another Lady's arm reaching out with her jewels.

Nicolas smiled. 'Well, I shall have to stay until you've woven her.'

'Is that why you've come all this way—just to see a strip of tapestry?' I said. 'That is a long trip for a woman's face.'

Nicolas shook his head. 'I have business with you, on behalf of Léon Le Vieux.'

I frowned. What could Léon want now? 'Come into the garden, then,' I said, 'so you can see Aliénor's flowers. We can talk there.'

I led the way. As Nicolas followed me through the doorway to the garden, Aliénor stepped aside to let us pass. 'Go and help your mother,' I said as she began to follow us.

Aliénor's garden is at its best in May. The flowers are fresh and new, not yet faded by the sun. Solomon's seal, periwinkle, violets, columbine, daisies, carnations, forget-me-nots—they were all blooming. Best of all, Aliénor's lily of the valley had its brief flowers, and its strange seductive smell was everywhere. I sat on a bench while Nicolas wandered for a few minutes, sniffing and admiring.

'I had forgotten how beautiful this garden is,' he said.

'What's brought you here, then?'

Nicolas laughed. 'As abrupt as ever.'

I shrugged. 'I am a busy man. We've much to do yet.'

Nicolas reached out and plucked a daisy. He began to twirl the bud between his fingers. 'That's why I'm here,' he said finally. 'Jean Le Viste is concerned about getting his tapestries on time.'

There was a rustle behind me—Aliénor was crouching in the herb bed with a pair of kitchen shears. She was trying not to be seen, but a blind girl is never good at hiding. 'What are you doing there, girl?' I growled. 'I told you to help your mother.'

'I am,' Aliénor faltered. 'She wanted chervil for the soup.'

Her mother had sent her to listen. I know my wife; she doesn't like to be excluded. I didn't send Aliénor back; she and Christine would know soon enough anyway. 'Don't repeat what you hear,' I said to her. 'Not to weavers, nor the neighbours, nor anyone.'

She nodded and began to cut herbs into her apron.

'It's nothing to be worried about,' I said to Nicolas. 'We did fall behind during the winter because of illness, but we're catching up now. We'll have them done for next Easter as agreed.'

Nicolas cleared his throat and squatted to sniff at some carnations and finger their petals. There was something more he wanted to say, I knew, but he was taking his time about it. When Christine appeared with mugs of beer he looked relieved. 'Ah, thank you, Madame,' he cried, stepping forward to meet her.

Normally Christine would send Madeleine or Aliénor to serve the beer, but this time she had come herself, hoping to hear the news from Nicolas rather than later, second hand, from me. I took pity on her. 'Sit,' I said, making room on the bench next to me. We faced Nicolas, with Aliénor clipping quietly behind us, and waited.

When Nicolas finally got to it, after drinking from his beer, he said it bluntly. 'Jean Le Viste wants his tapestries by Candlemas.'

'That's impossible!' Christine cried. 'We're working flat out as it is.'

'Can you hire more people?' Nicolas suggested. 'Put three weavers on each loom?'

'No,' I answered. 'We can't afford to pay another weaver. If we did that we'd be losing money. I'd be paying Jean Le Viste for the privilege of making the tapestries.'

Nicolas made a futile gesture with his hands. 'Jean Le Viste wants them by Candlemas and is sending soldiers to collect them then. If they aren't done he'll have them seized and not pay what's owed.'

I snorted. 'Whose soldiers?'

After a pause Nicolas said quietly, 'The King's.'

'But the contract says Easter,' Christine said. 'He can't break that.'

I waved away her words. Nobles can do what they like. Besides, Léon still held over me the threat of the Magi's green hose. 'Why didn't Léon come?' I said. 'I would prefer to discuss this with him.'

Nicolas shrugged. 'He was too busy.'

Aliénor's rustling stopped. My daughter is like me in judging people. She has an ear for lies, as I have an eye for them. She heard something in his voice, just as I saw the lie in his eye as it cast about but did not meet mine. He was leaving out part of the story.

'We'll talk more later,' I said. 'At Le Vieux Chien.' I turned to Christine. 'Is dinner ready?'

She jumped to her feet. 'Soon.'

I left Nicolas in the garden to finish his beer and went back to the workshop. I did not start weaving again, but stood in the doorway and watched the weavers as they leaned over their work.

Christine came to stand next to me. 'You know what we have to do,' she said in a low voice.

'We can't,' I answered as quietly. 'Apart from breaking Guild rules, it's hard on the eyes, and the candles drip onto the tapestries.'

'I didn't mean that. No one weaves well at night, not even you.'

'You want us to weave on Sundays? I'm surprised you would suggest such a thing.'

'That's not what I meant either. Of course we don't weave on Sundays; they're sacred.' Christine's eyes were bright. 'Let me weave *millefleurs* and Georges Le Jeune can do the harder parts with you.'

I was silent.

'As you said, we can't afford to pay another weaver,' she continued. 'But you have me. Use me, and let your son do what he is able to do.' She looked hard at me. 'You've taught him well. Now it's time to let him be his own weaver.'

She was trying to make that be what mattered, but I knew what was really behind her words. She wanted to weave.

'*Tiens*, I'm hungry,' was all I said. 'Isn't the meal ready yet?'

DIRECTLY AFTER THE BELLS rang to end the day's work, I took Nicolas to Le Vieux Chien. Georges Le Jeune came with us, and I sent Luc to fetch Philippe as well. We had not made a night of it in some time.

'Ah,' Nicolas sighed, looking around and smacking his lips as he drank. 'Brussels beer and Brussels company. How could I forget this? Taverns like graves where they serve water and call it beer.'

Myself I was glad it was quiet. 'It will be livelier later.'

'How did you get that?' Georges Le Jeune pointed at the yellowish bruises around Nicolas's eye. 'And you've hurt your side.'

'There was a brawl in one of the taverns where I drink in Paris. I got caught up in it, though it was naught to do with me.' He turned to me. 'How is Aliénor?' he asked. 'Is her trousseau coming on?'

I frowned. What could he know about Aliénor's trousseau? Only Christine and Georges Le Jeune knew of the agreement I'd made with Jacques Le Bœuf. Christine had insisted that we tell our son so that he would know what to expect when he took over the workshop.

Before I could think what to answer, Philippe arrived with Luc. 'We didn't expect you back,' Philippe said to Nicolas as he sat down. 'I thought you had vowed never to leave Paris again.'

Nicolas smiled. 'I have business with Georges, and I wanted to see how the tapestries are coming on. Of course it's always a pleasure to see Christine, and Aliénor. I was just asking Georges about her.' He turned to me again. 'How does she fare?'

'Aliénor is very busy now,' I said curtly. 'She sews the tapestries long into the night so that she won't be in our way during the day.'

'*Alors*, you have an advantage over the other workshops,' Nicolas said. 'If she could see she would never be able to sew in the dark. But being blind, she can work all night and not just between the bells.'

I had not thought of it that way.

'Of course she has no time to work on her trousseau, then,' Nicolas added. Philippe started. Well, no one expects Aliénor to marry.

'My daughter isn't worrying about a trousseau, but about these tapestries, like all of us,' I muttered. 'And now that we're to lose two months it'll be even worse.' I had not meant to blurt it out, but Nicolas annoyed me so that I couldn't help it.

Georges Le Jeune stared at me. 'Why are we to lose yet more time?'

'Ask Nicolas.'

Everyone—my son, Luc, Philippe and I—looked at Nicolas, who squirmed. 'I don't know,' he said at last. 'Léon said only that Jean Le Viste wants the tapestries earlier, not why he wants them.'

If he didn't know even that, there was little we could haggle over.

'Léon must know,' I said scornfully. 'He knows everything. Why didn't he come himself? Don't tell me he's too busy—that's never stopped him before, not when it's Jean Le Viste's business.'

Nicolas looked at me defiantly, then drained his mug of beer. 'Jean Le Viste's wife told Léon to send me. She wanted me gone from Paris.'

'What did you do to her?' Philippe asked.

'I tried to see her daughter.'

'You fool,' I muttered.

'You wouldn't think so if you could see her.'

'He has seen her,' Philippe said. 'We all have, in Taste.'

'Now we're paying for your folly,' I said. 'If Léon were here I'd be able to talk over the terms properly. He could make Jean Le Viste see reason. But you, you're just the messenger.'

'I'm sorry,' Nicolas said, 'but I doubt Léon Le Vieux could have helped. Jean Le Viste is a difficult man. Once he's decided on something it's not so easy to get him to change. *Tiens*,' he said, 'I'm sorry about all this. I'll give you a hand in the workshop if that will help.'

I snorted. 'You—' Then I stopped. I could almost hear Christine hissing in my ear, 'Take what help we can get.' I nodded. 'A new batch of wool has arrived that needs sorting. You can help with that.'

'You've not asked about the first two tapestries,' Philippe said. 'Smell and Sound. Your Taste is not the only woman in the world.'

Smell and Sound were rolled up, with rosemary tucked into them to keep out moths, and locked in a long wooden box in the workshop.

'You didn't change them, did you?' Nicolas said.

'No, no, they are as we painted them. And they look very fine when hung. They are like little worlds unto themselves.'

'Is that what noblewomen do all day?' Georges Le Jeune asked. 'Play music and feed birds and wear fine jewels out in the woods?'

Nicolas snorted. 'Some of them, perhaps.' He reached for the jug and shook it. There was no sound of sloshing.

'Luc, go and get more beer,' I said. I had given up being angry at Nicolas. Perhaps he was right—Jean Le Viste wanted what he wanted and there was naught we could do about it.

Luc grabbed the jug and went to the keeper of the barrel in the corner. As he waited for the jug to fill, one of the whores, who was dressed in yellow, began to talk to him, gesturing at Nicolas. Luc's eyes widened—he's not yet used to the attentions of women.

The jug was full, but the keeper handed it to the whore rather than to Luc. She hugged the jug to her chest and sauntered over to us. 'Your beer, gentlemen,' she said, bending over to show off her bosom

as she set the jug on the table. 'Any space for me here?'

'Of course,' Nicolas said, pulling her down onto the bench next to him. 'A table isn't complete without a whore or two.'

I would never say such a thing to a woman, not even a whore herself, but she in yellow just laughed. 'I'll call my friends over, then,' she said. In a moment our corner became the noisiest in the tavern.

I didn't stay long after that. Whores are a young man's game. As I left, the yellow whore was sitting in Nicolas's lap, one in green had her arm round a red-faced Georges Le Jeune, and a third in red was teasing Luc and Philippe.

When I got in Christine was sitting up waiting for me. She didn't say anything—I knew what she wanted to hear.

'*Alors*,' I said, 'you will weave. It's the only way we can finish them. Not a word to anyone, though.'

Christine nodded. Then she smiled. Then she kissed me and pulled me towards our bed. Yes, whores are best left to the young.

Aliénor de la Chapelle

I never thought I would be alone with Nicolas des Innocents again in the garden. My parents left us there, so concerned with the news Nicolas brought from Paris that Maman didn't even tell me to come away. I sat back on my heels, careful not to squash the lilies of the valley.

When he'd left last summer I thought Nicolas would never come back. He had been comfortable with us at first, but had suddenly stopped flirting with me and become short with Maman and Papa. At the same time he began to paint more quickly. Then one day he didn't come to the workshop, and Philippe told us that Nicolas had gone and left him to finish painting the last cartoon.

He was standing over me now. I got to my feet. I did not move away but stood close to him—so close that I could feel the heat of his tunic, smell the sweat in his hair and the sun-warmed skin of his neck.

'You look tired, beauty.'

'I'm up half the night with the sewing. Now with your news I'll be up all night.'

'I'm sorry for that. I don't like bringing bad news to anyone.'

I stepped back. 'Why did you leave without saying goodbye last summer?'

'I had work that took me back to Paris.'

'I can hear in his voice when a man is lying.'

Nicolas scraped his feet on the path. 'What do you care, beauty? I was just a bothersome Paris artist to you and your family.'

I smiled. 'That may be, but we expect the good grace of a farewell.'

Though I would never tell him, after he'd left I did not speak for three days. No one noticed—I am a quiet girl—except Maman, who said nothing but kissed my forehead when I finally opened my mouth again. She rarely kisses anyone.

Nicolas sighed. 'I found out things then I would rather not know. Maybe I'll tell you one day. Not now.'

Before we could say more, Maman called us in for our meal. Afterwards, Papa and the boys took Nicolas off to the tavern, while Maman sewed Taste and I sewed A Mon Seul Désir. We were very quiet. Maman was worrying about the tapestries.

Later, Papa came back and he and Maman went into the house while I stayed up sewing. Much later, Georges Le Jeune and Luc returned. Luc was sick with the beer and kept going out into the street.

I didn't want to ask but couldn't help myself. 'Didn't Nicolas come with you?' I said to Georges Le Jeune, who had thrown himself down onto his pallet near my feet. He smelt of beer and—I wrinkled my nose—a cheap flower water the whores buy from the market.

My brother laughed loudly and I shushed him so that he wouldn't wake our parents. 'He'll not be back tonight. He's found his own pallet, and it's yellow.' Georges Le Jeune began to laugh again.

I got up and stepped over him towards the house. I would rather go to my bed than stay in the workshop with his stink and silliness. I would get up early and work while the men were still asleep.

Nicolas didn't return till late the next morning, when we'd already been working many hours, except for Luc, who'd been so sick that he was still no use to us and was asleep. The weavers were at the looms. Maman and I were working with the batch of new wool that had just arrived. Maman was sorting it and I was preparing the bobbins.

When Nicolas finally arrived back he was still merry after a night at Le Vieux Chien. He thumped Papa and Georges Le Jeune on their backs and called out to Maman and me.

'Did you know,' he said, 'that Philippe is now a man of the flesh? He found his way with a whore last night, or rather, she showed him the way. He'll know what he's doing now.' Those last words seemed to be aimed like an arrow that flew straight across the room at me. I bowed my head over the bobbin and wound faster.

'Don't talk of such sinning in front of Aliénor,' Maman muttered.

'You can take your whoring straight back to Paris.'

'Christine—' Papa said.

'I won't have such muck in my house. I don't care how much we need his help.'

'Stop now,' Papa said.

Maman stopped. When Papa uses a certain voice she always stops. He cleared his throat. '*Alors*,' he said. 'Nicolas, you said last night that you would help us for a bit. You can help with this new batch of wool—you and Aliénor will sort it so that Christine doesn't have to. Aliénor will show you what needs doing, and you can be her eyes.'

I sat back in surprise. I didn't want him sitting next to me, smelling of other women.

Then Papa surprised us even more. 'Christine, you weave at Luc's place for the moment. When he's well you'll take your son's place. Georges Le Jeune, you're to do the figures in A Mon Seul Désir.'

'The figures?' my brother said. 'Which parts?'

'All of them. You can start on the Lady's face once the wool is prepared. You're ready for such work without me standing over you.'

Georges Le Jeune pushed the pedals under his feet with a crash. 'Thank you, Papa.'

'Go on, Christine,' Papa said.

The bench creaked as Maman and Georges Le Jeune sat down side by side. Otherwise the room was silent.

'We have to make this change,' Papa said. 'Otherwise we'll never finish the tapestries in time. Not a word of this outside the workshop. If the Guild hears of Christine weaving it could fine us, or even shut down our looms. She will always work at the back loom by the garden door so that anyone looking in the front window won't see her. Joseph and Thomas, there'll be extra pay at the end for you to keep your mouths shut.'

Joseph and Thomas said nothing. What could they say? Their jobs depended on Maman working as well. We had no choice.

Nicolas came over to me. 'Well, beauty, what am I to do? Show me. Here are my hands.' He put his on mine. He smelt of a used bed.

I pulled my hands back. 'Don't touch me.'

Nicolas laughed. 'You're not jealous of a whore, are you? I thought you didn't even like me.'

'Maman!'

But Maman was chuckling about something with Georges Le Jeune. She had already forgotten her anger at Nicolas, she was that pleased to be weaving. I would have to fend him off alone.

AT FIRST I WAS CAREFUL to stay as far from Nicolas as I could, and did not let our hands touch—not easy when working with wool. I didn't chatter to him, and answered his questions with few words. I was quick to find fault, and never praised him.

Instead of making him angry or aloof, my distance seemed to please him all the more. He began to call me Mistress of the Wool, and asked more questions the shorter my answers became. He was a good pupil. Within a few days he could make hanks of wool on the wool mill and prepare bobbins almost as well as Maman and me.

Nicolas had a keen eye for colour and separated the wool into more hanks of different shades than Maman would have. He even noticed that one red wool lot was two lots dyed separately and mixed together so that they didn't quite match. Papa sent the lot back and demanded a fee of the dyer not to complain to the dyers' guild. That night he took Nicolas to the tavern again to celebrate. Nicolas didn't come back till late the next morning. I handed him the bobbin I had been winding and escaped to the garden so that I wouldn't have to smell the whore on him.

Maman was less worried about Nicolas being with me now that he was staying to help us and she was able to weave. I've never known her so happy as when she was working at the loom. She paid little attention to Madeleine, nor me either. During the day she sat quietly at the loom, working as hard as any of the other weavers.

Nicolas went most nights to Le Vieux Chien, though he didn't always stay out all night. Sometimes Georges Le Jeune went with him, but not Luc, who'd been put off beer that first night. Most often Nicolas went alone, though. Later I would hear him coming down the street, singing or talking to men he'd met at the tavern.

I was often still sewing when he came back. I had even more work, for Maman was no longer helping. She was always tired after the day's weaving and needed to save her eyes. Nicolas was staying with us to save on the cost of an inn, and when he returned from the tavern he would lie on his pallet near the loom where Taste was being woven. Whenever I worked on that tapestry he was lying almost at my feet. Night after night we were together in the dark like that. We did not talk much, for I didn't want to wake Georges Le Jeune and Luc. But sometimes I could feel that he had turned towards me. If seeing is like a warp thread tied between two beams of a loom, I could feel his thread, taut.

One night Nicolas came back very late. Everyone was long abed but me. I was sewing the Lady's face in Taste, making careful stitches

round one eye. The face was half done. Soon enough Nicolas would get his wish to see her.

When he lay down on his pallet at my feet I felt the thread between us tighten. He wanted to say something, but didn't. The silence was very heavy. I waited until I couldn't any longer. 'What is it?' I whispered, feeling as if I were finally scratching a fleabite.

'Something I have long wanted to tell you, beauty.'

'The thing that made you leave?'

'Yes. Jacques Le Bœuf came to the tavern tonight.'

My mouth tightened. '*Alors?*'

'That man is a boor. I can't bear to think . . .'

'To think what?'

Nicolas paused. 'I heard your parents last summer, speaking of Jacques Le Bœuf. Your father has come to an agreement with him. About you.' He was struggling. 'You're to marry him. By Christmas, was the agreement—though that may change now the tapestries are needed sooner. But when they're done. By Lent, I should think.'

'I already knew that.'

'You know?'

'Madeleine told me. She heard it from my brother. They . . .' I waved my hand and did not finish what Georges Le Jeune and Madeleine were doing. Nicolas could guess. 'Though she said she wouldn't tell anyone, probably all of Brussels knows. But what do you care about what happens to me? I'm nothing to you.'

'I don't like seeing a pretty girl married off to a brute, *c'est tout*.' His voice didn't sound as if that were all. I waited.

'It is strange,' he continued. 'These tapestries . . . it's as if they make me see women differently. Some women.'

'But they are not real women doing real things.'

Nicolas chuckled. 'They have real faces, though, some of them. That's what I'm known for: painting ladies' faces. And now, tapestries.'

'You've done well from these designs, *alors*?'

'Better than your father, it seems.'

'Poor Papa is being ground down by your Jean Le Viste.'

'I am sorry about that.'

We were silent for a bit. I could hear his steady breath.

'What will you do about Jacques Le Bœuf?' Nicolas said then.

I laughed softly. 'What can I do? I am a blind girl who's lucky to have an offer at all.'

'*Tu sais*, Aliénor, there is something you can do.'

His voice changed when he said that. I froze. I knew what he was

thinking. I had thought of it myself. But it could leave me worse off than marrying Jacques Le Bœuf.

Nicolas seemed to have no doubts, though. 'Come, beauty,' he said, 'and I'll tell you the whole story of the unicorn's horn.'

I threaded my needle through the Lady's mouth so that I would know where to start again, then held out my hands to Nicolas. He took them, then pulled me up and lifted me from my seat, carrying me over the sleeping weavers and out to the garden. I clung to his neck and buried my nose in his warm skin. It smelt wonderful.

He laid me on a bed of flowers—daisies and carnations, forget-me-nots and columbine. I didn't care what got crushed, but for the lily of the valley swinging over my face. It is hard to grow and lasts for such a short time, and its scent is so sweet. I shifted sideways away from it. I had never thought that I would at last be with a man and yet be fretting over my plants.

'What are you laughing at, beauty?' Nicolas said, his face hovering just above mine.

'Nothing,' I said, and put my hand up to touch him.

He pressed down on me, his legs over my hips, his chest on my breasts. He put his mouth on mine, his lips moving, his tongue filling my mouth so that I wanted to laugh again. He yanked at my dress, pulling the skirt up and the bodice down. I shivered as my skin met the cool air and his skin.

Every sense was working, all but one. I wondered what it would be like to see while doing this. From the little I knew about what went on between men and women I had always thought you needed eyes to enjoy it, that it was not something I could do, or only with a man like Jacques Le Bœuf and then it would hurt, and I would always dread it. But now it hurt only for a moment, when Nicolas first entered me, and then my body felt him everywhere, tasting and touching and smelling and hearing him.

'What are you looking at?' I said to Nicolas.

'Nothing—my eyes are closed. It's better that way, for I feel more. It's too dark to see, anyway—there's no moon.'

So I was missing nothing. I was truly there with him, as much as anybody could be. This was a pleasure I could enjoy too, then. Something began rising in me, higher and higher with the rhythm of his pushing until I couldn't keep up with it, and I cried out as my body tensed and then released itself.

Nicolas clamped his hand over my mouth. 'Shhh!' he hissed, but he was laughing too. 'Do you want everyone to hear?'

We breathed in and out, in and out at the same time, slower and slower until we grew quiet.

'Nicolas, I want to do it again.'

'Now?' Nicolas laughed. 'You'll have to give me a minute, beauty. Let me have a little rest, then I'll see what I can do.'

'Tomorrow,' I said. 'And the night after, and the night after.'

'Are you sure, Aliénor? You know what may happen?'

'I know.' All of the talk, the songs, the jokes, had taught me that too. I knew what I wanted. So much had been kept from me because my eyes were broken. I would have this, and its outcome as well.

For two weeks we worked together in the workshop each day and lay together in the garden at night, crushing all of my flowers. By the end of that time the wool had been sorted, the Ladies in Taste and A Mon Seul Désir were woven, and we were done. Papa slid a mirror under Taste so that Nicolas could see the whole face of his Lady. That night he said goodbye to me in the garden. As he laid his head in my lap afterwards he said, 'Don't be sad, beauty.'

'I'm not sad,' I said, 'and I am no beauty.'

He left for Paris the next day.

Christine du Sablon

He was a clever one, that Nicolas des Innocents. I'll give him that. He got up to mischief right under our noses and I never even guessed till long after he'd gone. I was so busy keeping my eyes on my work that I didn't notice what was going on around me.

One Sunday after Mass Georges and Georges Le Jeune unrolled and hung Sound and Smell, the first two completed tapestries, for Nicolas to see. When they were ready I stood in the doorway admiring them. I did notice, however, that the Lady's hands as she plays her organ might have been better made. If only Georges had decided earlier to let me weave he would have had more time to do the hands properly. I kept this thought to myself.

'Something has made you smug, Madame,' Nicolas said just then.

I shook my head at him. 'I was just admiring my husband's skill,' I said. He continued to grin at me until I stepped down from the doorway. 'That's enough gaping, now,' I said. 'Roll them up again or the moths will get them. Aliénor, cut some fresh rosemary.'

Now that Nicolas had seen the first two tapestries, and the third and

fourth as they were being made, he said he wanted to look at the designs for the last two—Sight and Touch—to be sure everything was still all of a piece. So he said. I confess I did not think much about this. Luc got out the cartoons for Nicolas and he looked at them alone in the garden while the rest of us worked. Soon after he came back in and said, 'I would like to make a change.'

'Why?' Georges said. 'They've already been agreed.'

'I want to repaint the lily of the valley, now that I've been able to see it in the flesh in Aliénor's garden.'

Aliénor giggled in a way I'd not heard from her before. That didn't tell me anything at the time, though it should have.

'We can change it when we come to weave it,' Georges said. 'Remember, weavers can change the *verdure* as they wish.'

'I'd like to anyway,' Nicolas insisted. 'I could do with a change. Handling wool has made my fingers so rough I worry what women will say when they feel them.' Aliénor giggled again.

I frowned, but Georges just shrugged. 'As you like. The wool's almost sorted anyway. We won't be needing you much longer.'

Now that I think back on it, no one looked to see what Nicolas did. He worked on the cartoons in the garden, and when they were dry he rolled them up and stored them with the others.

His parting would have been solemn but we were too busy to think much of it. We were weaving fourteen hours a day then, with hardly a moment for meals. I fell into bed each night and slept without moving until Madeleine woke me in the morning. There was little time left to think about a man's departure. The night before Nicolas went the men did go to the tavern, but they fell asleep over their beer. Even Nicolas came back, rather than have a last go with his yellow whore. He seemed to have gone off her those last days. Now of course I know why.

After that there was a string of unbroken summer days. Fifteen hours, sixteen hours we sat at the looms, hot and still and silent. Even Joseph and Thomas no longer said much. My back ached all the time, my fingers were rubbed hard by the wool, and my eyes went red, yet I had never been happier. I was weaving.

Madeleine left us alone, bringing in beer without being asked, serving meals quickly and without fuss. Her cooking had improved since I had left her to it—rather like Georges Le Jeune's weaving, which I now couldn't tell apart from his father's. Aliénor too was quiet—but then she always has been. She sewed for us and worked in her garden. Sometimes she slept during the day so she could sew all night when the tapestries were free from weavers.

At the end of the summer, just after the Feast of the Birth of the Virgin, we finished. I had thought I would celebrate, yet when I'd finished the last red edge, tied off the last bobbin, helped Aliénor to sew shut the last slit, I felt flat, like a stew with no pepper in it.

Of course I was proud when Georges let me use the scissors for some of the cutting-off. I had never before been allowed to cut the warp threads. And when we unrolled the tapestries to see them whole for the first time, they were a joy to see. My own weaving on A Mon Seul Désir did not stand out from the others', but fitted in as if I had always been a weaver.

We had no time to rest. There were still two tapestries to weave in five months. Georges said nothing but I knew I would be weaving them too. The days were getting shorter and everyone was needed.

One Sunday after Mass we were going for a walk in the Grand-Place when Aliénor grabbed my arm. 'Jacques Le Bœuf!' she hissed. Her nose was right—he was across the square, making his way to us. I confess I hadn't given the woad dyer a thought all summer. We hadn't told Aliénor, nor had I stitched even a cap for her trousseau.

I moved her hand to Georges Le Jeune's arm. 'Take her to L'Arbre d'Or,' I whispered—only weavers and their families are allowed inside the weavers' guild. As my children hurried away I tucked my hand into the crook of Georges's arm and we stood close together, as if waiting for a storm to come and knock us over.

Jacques stumped up to us. 'Where's the girl gone?' he shouted. 'Always she runs from me—not much good to have a wife who runs away every time her husband comes near.'

'Shhh!' Georges hissed.

'Don't you shush me. I'm bored of keeping quiet. Haven't I kept my mouth shut all this past year? And why shouldn't I see her? She's got to get used to me some time.' He turned towards L'Arbre d'Or.

Georges grabbed his arm. 'Jacques—you know you can't go in there. And I'm only asking you to keep quiet for a little longer.'

'Why?'

Georges dropped his hand. 'I haven't told her yet.'

'She doesn't know?' Jacques bellowed even louder than before. A crowd was beginning to gather, though at a spitting distance because of the smell.

I coughed. 'You must be patient with us, Jacques. As you know, we've been very busy with the tapestries, where your blue wool plays an important part. So important,' I continued, 'that I have no doubt you will be swamped with orders once people have seen them.'

Jacques Le Bœuf's eyes gleamed for a moment—but only for a moment. 'But the girl, the girl. She'll come to me at Christmas, yes? Have you bought her bed yet?'

'I'm just going to order it tomorrow,' Georges said. 'Chestnut, I thought. We have one and it has served us well.'

Jacques chuckled in a way that made my belly turn. 'Georges will come very soon to see you about the arrangements,' I said, 'for of course we shouldn't be discussing business on the Sabbath.' I glared at him and he ducked his head. With a little more scolding I was able to get him to go, and the crowd drifted away.

Georges and I looked at each other. 'The bed,' he said.

'The trousseau,' I said at the same time.

Georges shook his head. 'What will he say when I tell him it won't be Christmas, but Candlemas?'

Not long after, I had answers to these questions, though not the answers I'd expected.

At first no one noticed. The looms were dressed for Sight and Touch, then we spent most of a day warping the looms, with Philippe and Madeleine helping. Then Georges unrolled the cartoons, ready to slide them underneath the warp. I studied the edges of the designs, checking to be sure we had the right colours ready. As I did so I glanced at the Lady in the cartoon of Sight. It took a moment for me to see it, but when I did I stepped back as if someone had thumped me in the chest. Nicolas had changed something, that was certain, and it was not just the lily of the valley.

At the same time Georges Le Jeune began to laugh. '*Regardes*, Maman!' he cried. 'So that's what Nicolas was doing in the garden. You should be pleased.'

His laugh made me so angry I slapped him. Georges Le Jeune stared at me, astonished.

'Christine!' Georges said sharply. 'What is this?'

I turned my glare to Aliénor. She was sitting on a stool, untangling thread. Of course she couldn't see what Nicolas had done to Sight.

'I was only saying to Maman that Nicolas has made her likeness in Touch,' Georges Le Jeune said. 'Then she goes and slaps me for it!'

I stared at him, then looked over at Touch. He was right. The Lady did look like me, with my long hair and long face, my pointed chin and strong jaw. I was the proud weaver's wife, smugly holding a banner in one hand, the unicorn's horn in the other. I remembered the moment he had captured, when I'd been standing in the doorway thinking of my weaving. Nicolas des Innocents knew me too well.

'I'm sorry,' I said to my son. 'I thought you were talking about Sight, where he has made the Lady look like Aliénor.'

Everyone looked at Sight, and Aliénor raised her head. 'I was angry,' I lied, 'because I think it cruel to have a blind girl stand for Sight.' I said nothing about the unicorn being in my daughter's lap and what that might mean. I watched Georges and the other men as they looked, but they didn't seem to notice. Men can be thick sometimes.

'It does look like you, Aliénor,' Georges Le Jeune said, 'with your crooked eyes and your crooked smile.'

Aliénor turned bright red and fumbled with the wool in her lap.

'Will we keep them like this, Papa?' Georges Le Jeune asked. 'We're not meant to change figures that have been agreed with the patron.'

Georges was frowning. 'We may have to use them as they are. I don't remember what the faces were like before. Do you, Philippe?'

Philippe was staring hard at the painting. Then he raised his round eyes to Aliénor, and I knew he was as troubled as I was by the changed designs and what that could mean. 'I don't remember,' he said. 'Not enough to change them back.'

'All right, then,' Georges said. 'We'll just have to weave them like this and hope no one notices.' He shook his head. 'Damn that painter. I don't need yet another worry.'

Aliénor jerked her head at his words, and for a moment she looked as sad as the Lady in Sight. I bit my lip. Had Nicolas painted her as the Virgin who gets the unicorn only because he desired it, or had it indeed happened?

I began to watch my daughter. She seemed no different. She was not sick in her stomach, or more tired than we all were. Nor was her waist thick or her belly round. Perhaps she had managed to escape the trap that men set for women.

In one way she did change: she wasn't as curious about things as she had been. It used to be that she was always asking me to describe something, or to tell her what I or others were doing. Now I'd begun working on her trousseau at night when we couldn't weave. As the year grew old and the work days shorter, I wasn't so tired by the day's end and could do a bit of sewing after we ate. On nights when I worked on shirts or handkerchiefs or headscarves to fill her chest, Aliénor didn't ask why I wasn't joining her at the tapestries, or what I was working on instead. Indeed, she seemed happy to sew alone.

It was her blindness that gave her up. Aliénor has never understood how others see her. So when she did at last begin to thicken, she thought her heavy winter skirt covered it but didn't know that the

whole way she stood and moved had changed.

There wasn't one moment when I knew for certain she was with child. It crept over me as twilight does, so that one day in November, when I saw her in the garden stepping awkwardly among the cabbages, I simply wondered when I should tell Georges. I should have told him weeks before, of course, back when he was fretting about Aliénor's bed. Every dowry must have one, and he had been to see a carpenter, returning to worry over its cost. 'There's not a *sou* to pay him,' he told me, 'unless I use the money meant for Jacques for the last lot of wool. Jacques will be furious as it is when I tell him she can't go to him until February.'

'When will you tell her?' I asked. Aliénor still didn't know of what was planned for her.

Georges shrugged. He is no coward, but he didn't relish seeing his daughter so unhappy.

I was no coward either, but I didn't tell him what I suspected, and I didn't ask her. Of course I should have, but I didn't want to disturb what peace we had in the workshop. During those many months of weaving, Georges and I had put off problems, to see to them after the tapestries were done. I am ashamed to say even our prayers were cut short, and we neglected feast days.

But Aliénor's problem could not wait. A baby cannot be put off to another day. It was Thomas who spotted it. Of all the weavers his were the eyes that roamed the most. If anyone moved about the workshop—especially Aliénor or Madeleine—his eyes followed them. One morning Aliénor stood at the side of one of the looms, handing across a bobbin of wool to Georges, who was just beginning the Lady's face in Sight. Joseph and Thomas were on either side. As she leaned against the loom the shape of her belly was revealed to anyone who wanted to see it. No one did—save Thomas, who was sitting close to her.

'*Alors*, Mistress of the Wool,' he said, copying Nicolas, though without the charm, 'I see you're fattening up nicely. When is the harvest?'

Aliénor dropped the bobbin onto the warp threads and stepped back. She pressed her hands to her sides, but that movement caught her skirt and pulled it tight across her belly so that if anyone hadn't understood Thomas before, they did now.

It seemed my husband was the longest in taking it in. He stared at Aliénor but didn't seem to see her. When at last he did understand, Georges looked at me, confirming his thoughts in the grim line of my mouth. He stood up, the bench creaking.

'Do you have something to say to me, Aliénor?' he said quietly.

'No.' Aliénor was even quieter.

'Who is the man?'

She didn't move or speak. Her face looked broken.

Georges stepped over the bench and knocked her to the ground with one heavy blow. Like any mother, Aliénor protected her child, wrapping her arms round her belly as she fell. She struck her head against the loom bench. I went to step between them.

'No, Christine,' Georges said. I stopped. There are times when a mother cannot protect her child.

There was a movement in the doorway. Madeleine had been peeking in, and now disappeared. A moment later I saw her run past the workshop windows.

Aliénor sat up. Blood was running from her nose. Perhaps the sight of that vivid red stopped Georges's hand. She got up unsteadily, then turned and limped across the workshop and out to the garden.

Georges looked round at Joseph and Thomas and Georges Le Jeune and Luc all sitting in a line like judges, staring up at him. 'Go back to work,' he said.

They did, one by one bowing their heads over the tapestries.

Georges looked at me and his face was desperate. I jerked my head towards the house, and he followed me there. We stood side by side at the fire, staring down into it.

'Who do you think the father is?' Georges said. He hadn't made the connection between what the Lady in Sight was doing and what Aliénor had done. In a way I hoped he never would.

'I don't know,' I lied.

'Perhaps it's Jacques Le Bœuf himself.'

'You know it's not. She would never do that with him.'

'What will we do, Christine? Jacques will never take her now. He'll probably never dye wool for us again. And there's the bed money I've already paid that is his.'

I thought of Aliénor shuddering in the Sablon when she spoke of Jacques Le Bœuf, and a part of me was glad she was spared sharing a bed with him, though of course I couldn't say so.

Before I could respond there were footsteps outside again, and Madeleine came in, with Philippe de la Tour behind her. I sighed—one more outsider to witness our shame and Aliénor's misery.

'Go away,' Georges said. 'We're busy.'

Philippe ignored his rude words. 'I wanted to speak to you,' he said. Then he seemed to lose his nerve. Madeleine gave him a shove. 'About . . . about Aliénor,' he continued.

Georges closed his eyes briefly and grunted. 'So you're busy telling everyone already, are you, girl?' he said to Madeleine.

Madeleine scowled at him. 'You are all blind,' she said. 'You never see how he loves her.' We stared at her—Madeleine never talks back. And could she be talking of Jacques Le Bœuf?

'Leave her be, Georges. Madeleine means well,' Philippe said, his voice full of fear. 'I've not come to mock. It's just—' He stopped, as if terror were choking him.

'What is it, then? What use can you be to us now?'

'I . . . I am the father.'

'You?'

Philippe looked at me wildly. In a flash I understood. I held his eyes and nodded slightly so that he would take courage and go on. Madeleine must be right: Philippe loved Aliénor. Now he was going to help her; her and us too.

Philippe gulped and kept his eyes on my face to steady him. 'I am the father, and I would take Aliénor for my wife, if she'll have me.'

Philippe de la Tour

My wife is a quiet woman. That is no bad thing. Quiet women don't gossip and aren't as likely to be gossiped about.

Nonetheless, I wished she would talk more to me.

She said nothing when we married except to answer the priest. She never spoke of the baby she carried, nor of Nicolas. She never thanked me. Once I told her I was glad to have saved her. 'I saved myself,' she answered, and turned her back.

We weren't living with my parents yet, and wouldn't until the tapestries were done. They needed her to sew at night, not to lie with me. Though we'd knelt before the priest at the Sablon, we hadn't lain together yet. Aliénor was too big, and not yet willing. All in time, I hoped.

When Georges and Christine went to see Jacques Le Bœuf, they told me to stay with neighbours until it was safe. I refused. I can't hide from him all my life. A few days later I saw him and he spotted me across the market on the Place de la Chapelle as I was buying walnuts, and bellowed. There was time for me to run but I stood still and watched him charge towards me like a bull. I should have been scared, but all I could think of was Aliénor's crooked smile. She smiled little enough

for me, and she never would have done for this smelly brute. Even with him coming for me now, I was glad I'd saved her.

Everything went black after he knocked me flat. When I woke I was lying in the snow—the first of the winter—with walnuts scattered about and Jacques Le Bœuf standing over me. I wondered if he would kill me. But in truth he is a simple man and flattening me was enough. He leaned over and growled, 'Take her, then. What use is a wife with no eyes? I'll marry my cousin and she'll be more help to me.'

I wasn't going to argue with him. I couldn't, anyway—the smell of him made everything go black again. When I next woke he was gone and they were carrying me along the rue Haute to Georges's house. Aliénor herself washed my bruises. She said nothing when I asked what had happened. Only when I asked what the plant in the water was did she speak. 'Vervain,' she said. It was only one word, but the sound of it was like music.

Jacques Le Bœuf left me alone after that, but insisted that Georges pay him immediately for the last lot of blue wool or he'd not supply it. Georges had already given the money meant for Jacques to a carpenter for Aliénor's dowry bed. There I was able to help him—my first useful act as his son-in-law. I had a cousin soon to marry and I convinced her parents to buy the chestnut bed, and so Georges got his money back from them. Aliénor and I could wait for a bed.

Helping him with that made things a little less awkward with Georges, though I still caught him glaring at me sometimes, wondering how I could've been with Aliénor without him knowing. He had trusted me once, but now he didn't know what to think.

Georges Le Jeune too was funny with me, and less friendly than before, even though we were now brothers. Thomas and Luc liked to snigger and tease me—that was no surprise. At least they left Aliénor alone. No one said anything to her about it.

It was all easier to bear because Christine was kind to me. She was clear in accepting me as family, and that made the others hold in check whatever they were feeling. No one seemed to guess what had really happened, even as a clue pointing to it sat in the threads right under their noses. They never thought of Nicolas, they assumed the unicorn was me. It was easier that way.

But then, there was little time to ponder such things, for there was little time left to finish Sight and Touch. The days were short and dark and the cold didn't help. Madeleine put buckets of coals from the fire at the weavers' feet, but they made little difference. Nor could the weavers wear heavy clothes round their arms or shoulders, for that got

in the way of their work. They did wear fingerless gloves Christine had knitted out of extra bits of wool, but they still got chilblains on the tips of their fingers.

Georges took the short days especially hard. The months of worry over the work had marked him. Dark rings grew under his eyes, themselves crisscrossed with red. Overnight it seemed his hair turned completely grey. He hunched his shoulders and did not speak much or with cheer. Christine wouldn't let him work on Sundays, but he was so tired that he slept during Mass at the Sablon. The priest said nothing. He along with everyone else knew the workshop was in trouble.

I came most days to the workshop to help. There were no cartoons for me to draw elsewhere—*lissiers* rarely get new commissions in the winter, when no one travels up from Paris and elsewhere. Besides, I wanted to be there, if only just to be near my wife. Aliénor helped Madeleine, or sewed the tapestries when there was space for her. But much of the time she and I were like cats roaming through alleys in search of scraps to keep ourselves busy. It was painful to watch others work so hard and not be able to do so as well.

There was little celebration over Christmastide. We had the Eve feast at least, though food was scarce and dull, with no money for meat or cakes or wine. Only Joseph and Thomas did not work on the Feast of St Stephen. Christine did go to Mass for the Holy Innocents, and insisted everyone go to the Sablon for the Epiphany, but afterwards we worked rather than feasted.

One day Georges looked over the tapestry and frowned at the leaves of an oak tree Christine had been weaving. 'You've left out a bit of branch. See, it ends there and begins again there, with leaves where there should be wood.'

Christine stared at her work. The other weavers were silent. Georges Le Jeune came over to look. 'Does it matter?' he said, peering at the leaves. 'No one will even notice.'

Georges gave him a look, then said, 'Move, Christine.' She went to stand by Aliénor at the wool mill, and wept as he began to unpick her weaving. I had never seen her cry.

'*Bonjour!*' We all turned to look at the head poking through the workshop window. It was another *lissier*, Rogier Le Brun, come to check on the workshop for the Guild. Georges had made such unexpected visits himself to other workshops—in this way the Guild assured its members kept to its rules.

I didn't know how long Rogier Le Brun had been there watching us. If he had seen Christine weaving there could be trouble. Certainly he

had seen her crying and would wonder why. We were all thinking that as Christine wiped her eyes on her sleeve and hurried to join her husband in greeting the *lissier*. 'Of course you will take some beer, and there are some spiced cakes left from the Epiphany. Madeleine!' she called as she stepped towards the house, Rogier Le Brun protesting feebly at the food and drink. He must know how hard up the workshop was. Those cakes were a gift from a pitying neighbour.

'Madeleine is out,' I whispered to Aliénor, who went to help her mother. Rogier Le Brun's eyes followed her as she crossed the workshop, belly straining at her dress. When she was gone he looked at me for a moment, as if trying to guess how a shy man like me could have managed such a thing. My face went hot with shame.

'Ripping out work, eh?' Rogier Le Brun said, turning to the oak Georges had been unpicking in the tapestry. 'The apprentice make a mess of things as usual, hmm?' He tapped Luc's head lightly. Luc glared up at him but mercifully did not deny it. He is a bright boy and knows when to keep quiet. Rogier Le Brun narrowed his eyes and turned back to Georges. 'I sympathise, Georges. There is nothing worse for a *lissier* than pulling out work. But for tapestries like these, every bead must be good, eh? It won't do to have weavers who can't weave well work on it. The Guild wouldn't pass the work, would they?'

The room was silent. 'Luc has made very few mistakes,' Georges mumbled.

'Of course not—I'm sure you've trained him well. But this will put you back, *n'est-ce pas*? When must the tapestries be done?'

'Candlemas.'

'Candlemas? How can you finish by then?'

Before Georges could answer, Christine had reappeared with mugs of beer. 'Don't you worry about us, Rogier,' she interrupted. 'We'll manage. Look, the other tapestry is almost done, and then the weavers can move across to this one.'

Rogier Le Brun was barely listening. I could see him considering the work left to do, the number of weavers, and the time there was left to do it in. We all watched him do his figuring. The bench the weavers sat on creaked as they shifted about. I shuffled my feet. Despite the cold, Georges's brow dripped with sweat.

Christine folded her arms across her chest. 'We will manage,' she repeated, 'as I expect you will manage when Georges pays you a visit on the Guild's behalf.' She smiled at him.

There was a short silence as Rogier Le Brun took in her reminder of how Guild men help each other.

Aliénor came out then and stepped lightly to his side. 'Please, Monsieur, try one,' she said, and held a plate of cakes in front of him.

With that Rogier Le Brun laughed. 'Georges,' he said, biting into a cake, 'you may have problems in the workshop but your women make up for it!'

When he had gone, Georges and Christine looked at each other. 'Georges, I think St Maurice must be watching over us,' she declared, shaking her head. 'If I hadn't woven that oak poorly, I'd still have been weaving when Rogier came. And if he had caught me at it outright, he could not have turned a blind eye.'

Georges smiled for the first time in many weeks. It was like ice cracking on a pond after a long winter, an evil spell breaking. The boys laughed and began mimicking Rogier, and Christine went for more beer. Myself, I stepped over to Aliénor and kissed her brow. She did not lift her head, but she did smile.

TWO WEEKS BEFORE CANDLEMAS, the weavers finished Touch. It was a quick and cursory cutting-off from the loom. When the tapestry was unwound and turned over, Georges nodded and praised the work, but his thoughts were in his fingers, and his fingers wanted to be weaving.

Georges Le Jeune moved over to join his father and Luc at the loom of Sight, and Christine left it to make the hem of Touch. She and Aliénor folded the ends of the warp threads under, then began to sew a piece of woven brown wool around the edges to finish it. As I sat near Alienor, I said suddenly, 'Show me how to do that.'

Christine chuckled and Aliénor wrinkled her brow. 'Why? You're a painter, not a woman.'

'I want to help.' You're my wife, I would sit with you, I wanted to say.

'Why don't you find your own work?'

Then I had an idea. 'If you teach me I can help you with the hemming and Christine will be free to work with the others.'

Christine looked at Georges. After a moment he nodded.

'All right,' Christine said, poking her needle through the wool and getting up. 'Aliénor will show you how to do it.'

'Maman,' Aliénor said then. She sounded annoyed.

Christine turned to look at her. 'He's your husband, girl. You'd best get used to that and be grateful for it. Think of the alternative.'

Aliénor bowed her head. Christine gave me a little smile and I thanked her with my eyes.

Aliénor wouldn't let me sew the hem straight away, but made me practise on a scrap of cloth. It was simple enough sewing, yet I

couldn't get the stitches as even as hers, and kept pricking my fingers till Aliénor laughed. 'Maman, we'll never finish this if you let Philippe work on it. I'll be always ripping out his work and starting again. Or he'll bleed all over it!'

'Give him a chance,' Christine said. 'He may surprise you.'

After a day of errors I began to improve, and at last Aliénor allowed me to work on the hem. We didn't speak much at first, but sitting together for so many hours seemed to make things easier between us. Then, gradually, we began to talk—of the cold, or the hem we sewed, or the walnuts we'd had at dinner. Little things.

We were almost done with the hem when I got up the courage to ask about something bigger. 'What will we name the baby?' I said quietly.

Aliénor stopped sewing, her needle paused over the cloth. When she answered, her tone was not as sad as I'd expected. 'Etienne, for your father. Or Tiennette if it's a girl.'

I smiled. '*Merci*, Aliénor.'

My wife shrugged. She did not begin sewing again, though. She threaded the needle through the seam and left it there. Then she turned to me. 'I would like to feel your face, so that I will know what my husband is like.'

I leaned over and put her hands on my cheeks. She began rubbing and squeezing my face all over. 'Your chin is pointed like my cat's!' she cried. She likes her cat—I have seen her sit with it in her lap and stroke it for hours.

'Yes,' I said. 'Like your cat.'

A WEEK BEFORE CANDLEMAS, Georges finished the last curve of the lion's tail. Three days before Candlemas, first Christine, then Luc reached the edge of the tapestry. Georges was still working on a rabbit—his signature was a rabbit holding its paw to its cheek—while Georges Le Jeune finished a dog's tail. Aliénor joined her father and brother on the bench to sew slits then, though her belly was so huge it kept her far from the tapestry. As I watched, she stopped for a moment, hands pressed against her belly, her brow furrowed. Then she began to sew again. Several minutes later she did the same thing and I knew the birth was beginning.

I drew Christine aside and quietly showed her. 'We weren't expecting this for a few weeks yet—she's early,' Christine commented.

'Shouldn't she be in bed?' I said.

Christine shook her head. 'Not yet. It could be days. Let her work if she wants. It'll take her mind off the pain.'

And so Aliénor sewed for many hours that day, long after it was dark and the weavers had stopped. Even when everyone was asleep she kept sewing. I stayed awake, lying on a pallet and listening to her shift and tense on the bench. At last, very late in the night she moaned, 'Philippe, get Maman.'

They put her in bed in the house, and Georges came to sleep in the workshop. In the morning Christine sent Luc for the midwife. Soon he burst back into the workshop. 'Jean Le Viste's soldiers are here!' he cried. 'I heard when I was out. They've gone to the Guild in the Grand-Place to ask after you.'

Georges and Georges Le Jeune looked up from their work. 'It's not Candlemas for two days yet,' Georges said.'We'll be done today but there's the hemming to do and the women are busy.' He glanced at the house—from inside came a long groan ending in a shout.

'I can hem it,' I said quickly, pleased to be of use at last.

Georges looked at me. '*Bon*,' he said. For the first time since Aliénor and I married I felt I was a useful part of the workshop.

'Don't fret, lad,' Georges added to Luc, who was hopping from one foot to the other. 'The soldiers will wait. *Tiens*, go and tell Joseph and Thomas to come this afternoon for the cutting-off—they'll want to be here. We can't wait on the women.' Another moan from inside made him and Georges Le Jeune duck their heads over their work and Luc run from the workshop.

She was screaming when we cut Sight from its loom. A cutting-off is meant to be joyful, but her screams drove us to cut as fast as we could. Only when we'd turned over the tapestry and seen it whole for the first time was I distracted from Aliénor's cries.

Georges looked at it and began to laugh. It was as if he had been holding his breath for months and suddenly could let it out. While Georges Le Jeune and Luc and Thomas began thumping each other on the back, Georges laughed and laughed, Joseph joining him. It was a strange response to a long journey, but I too found myself laughing. We had indeed been travelling a long way.

Aliénor screamed again, and everyone stopped. Georges wiped his eyes, looked at me and said, 'We'll be at Le Vieux Chien. Let me know when the baby comes, or the soldiers—whichever is first.' Then, after almost two years of work that had given him a head of grey hair, a stoop and a squint, the *lissier* walked away from the tapestry without even looking back. I think he was glad not to.

When they were gone, I studied Sight for a long time. The Lady is sitting, and the unicorn lies in her lap. You might think that they love

each other. Perhaps they do. But the Lady holds up a mirror and the unicorn may well be looking at itself with eyes of love rather than at the Lady. Her eyes are crooked in her face. Her smile is full of woe. It may be that she does not even see him. That is what I think.

I was pleased that Georges trusted me with the hem. I got out the brown wool and a needle and thread, and carefully folded the warp threads under as I'd seen Aliénor and Christine do. Then I sat by the window and made a stitch, then another. Each time Aliénor screamed I gritted my teeth and quelled my shaking hands.

I'd sewed half of one side of the tapestry when the screaming stopped. I stopped too, and simply sat and waited. Though I should have prayed, I was too frightened to do even that.

At last Christine appeared in the doorway with a bundle of soft linen in her arms. She smiled at me.

'Aliénor?' I said.

Christine laughed at the look on my face. 'Your wife is fine. All women scream like that. That's what birth is. But don't you want to know? We have a new weaver here.' She held up her grandson. His face was squashed and red, and he had no hair.

I cleared my throat and held out my arms for Etienne. 'You've forgotten who his father is,' I said. 'He will be a painter.'

PARIS

Septuagesima 1492

Nicolas des Innocents

I have never liked the weeks leading up to Lent. It's cold, a cold gone on far too long. There is little food, and what is left is dull—pickled and salted and dried and hard. I long for fresh lettuce, for fresh game, for a plum or a strawberry. Nor do I find women to please me then. I am waiting. I prefer Lent, even with its rigours. At least it grows warmer and lighter with each day.

I don't work much during Septuagesima. My hands are stiff with the cold and can't hold a brush. One bitter morning, when I was shivering under many blankets and wondering whether I should bother getting up, I had a message to meet Léon Le Vieux at Saint-Germain-des-Prés. I didn't go there now, for fear of seeing Geneviève de Nanterre. I had no hope of seeing her daughter there. A friend who kept an ear out for me on the rue du Four—where I dared not show

my face—said that Claude had been sent away the previous summer, none of the servants knew where. Béatrice too had disappeared.

I wrapped myself in all my clothes and hurried south to Saint-Germain-des-Prés. I found Léon out in the withered cloisters garden. Little was growing, though there were a few snowdrops and other shoots pushing through the mud. I didn't know what they would grow into, although Aliénor had tried to teach me about plants.

Léon Le Vieux walks with a stick in winter to help him over the snow and ice. He was using it now to poke at the lavender and rosemary bushes. He looked up. 'I'm always surprised how hardy these are in winter, even when everything else is dead.' He reached over and plucked some leaves from each, then squeezed them and put his fingers to his nose. 'Of course they don't smell so sweet now—that comes with sun and warmth.'

'Then too it depends on the gardener, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'Perhaps.' Léon Le Vieux dropped the leaves and turned to me. 'Jean Le Viste's tapestries have arrived.'

At the news I felt an unexpected surge of joy. 'So Georges did finish them by Candlemas! Did you see him?'

Léon Le Vieux shook his head. 'I refuse to travel on such roads in winter, even if the King himself asked me. No, I sent a message with the soldiers and had a Brussels merchant I know check on the work. And of course the weavers' guild there approved them—that is the important thing.'

'Have you seen them yet? How do they look?'

Léon began to walk towards the archway leading out. 'Come along to the rue du Four and you can see for yourself.'

'Am I welcome?'

'Monseigneur Le Viste has had them hung and wants you to check them to make sure the height is right.' He looked back at me and added, 'Behave yourself there.' Then he laughed.

Even in my drunkest fantasies during sessions at Le Coq d'Or, I'd never dreamed I would be invited to pass easily through the door of Claude Le Viste's house. There I was, though, with the sour-faced steward letting us in. If I had not been with Léon Le Vieux I would have gone for him, to pay him back for the beating he'd given me. Instead I had to follow meekly in his footsteps as he led us to the Grande Salle, then left us there to fetch his master.

I stood in the middle of the room, with Léon Le Vieux at my side, and looked back and forth from one Lady to another. I looked for longer than I have ever looked at anything. Léon too was very still and

silent. It was as if we were frozen in a dream. I was not sure I wanted to be woken.

When at last Léon shifted his feet, I opened my mouth to say something and laughter came out instead. It was not the response I'd expected to have. Yet I kept thinking, How could I ever have worried about dog-like lions and fat unicorns when these Ladies were here? They were all of them beautiful, peaceful, content. To stand among them was to be part of their magical, blessed lives. What unicorn would not be seduced by them?

It was not just the Ladies who made the tapestries so powerful, but the *millefleurs* as well. I felt as if I were standing in a summer field even in the midst of a cold dark day in Paris. It was those *millefleurs* that made the room whole, pulling together the Ladies and their unicorns, the lions and servants, and me too. I felt I was with them.

'What do you think?' Léon asked.

'Glorious. They are even better than I dreamed I could make them.'

Léon chuckled. 'I see your pride has not lessened. Remember, you were only one part of their making. Georges and his workshop deserve the highest praise.'

'Georges will do very well from them.'

Léon shook his head. 'They won't make him a rich man—Jean Le Viste is stingy with his purse. And from what I heard, Georges may not be so quick to take on more work. My Brussels merchant said he only saw Georges either drunk or asleep, and he squints now. Indeed, it was the cartoonist who had to help Christine sew the hem of the last tapestry. Georges was drunk and the daughter was abed with a baby.' He narrowed his eyes at me. 'Did you know of this?'

I shrugged, though I did smile to myself—Aliénor had got what she wanted from me. 'I haven't been to Brussels since last May—how could I know?'

'Not been to Brussels for nine months, eh?' Léon Le Vieux shook his head. 'Never mind—she has married the cartoonist.'

'Ah.' I was more surprised than I let on. Philippe was not as shy with women as I'd thought. I was glad for Aliénor. Philippe was a good man, and he was not Jacques Le Bœuf.

There was a noise outside the door, and Jean Le Viste and Geneviève de Nanterre entered the Grande Salle. I quickly bowed to hide my surprise, for I had not expected to see her. When I raised my head she was smiling at me as she had the day I'd met her, when I'd first flirted with Claude—smiling as if she knew what was in my head.

'*Alors*, painter, what do you think of them?' Jean Le Viste asked. I

wondered if he had forgotten my name. Before I could speak he added, 'Are they hung at the right height? I thought they should be another arm's length off the floor, but Léon says they look fine as they are.'

It was just as well that I hadn't spoken, for now I grasped that he didn't want to talk of the tapestries' beauty or the weavers' skill, but rather of how they graced his room. I studied them for a moment. They came to within a hand's length of the floor. That put the Ladies just a little above us. Any higher and they would tower over us.

I turned to Geneviève de Nanterre. 'What do you think, Madame? Should the Lady be higher?'

'No,' she said. 'That is not necessary.'

I nodded. 'I think, Monseigneur, we are agreed that the room looks very impressive as it is.'

Jean Le Viste shrugged. 'It will suit the occasion.' He turned to go.

I couldn't resist asking. 'Please, Monseigneur, which tapestry do you like best?'

Jean Le Viste stopped and gazed about him as if he had only just realised the tapestries were to be looked at. He frowned. 'This one,' he said, gesturing at Sound. 'The flag is very fine, and the lion noble. Come,' he said to Léon Le Vieux.

'I'm staying a moment to have a word with Nicolas des Innocents,' Geneviève de Nanterre announced. Jean Le Viste hardly seemed to hear, but strode to the door with Léon Le Vieux at his heels.

When they were gone Geneviève de Nanterre chuckled softly. 'My husband has no favourite. He chose the tapestry nearest to hand—did you see? And it's not the finest. The Lady's hands are awkward, and the pattern of the tablecloth is too square and harsh.'

Clearly she had studied the tapestries carefully. At least she hadn't said that the unicorn was fat.

'Which tapestry do you like best, Madame?'

She pointed. 'That one.' I was surprised that she chose Touch—I had expected her to prefer A Mon Seul Désir. After all, she was the Lady.

'Why that one, Madame?'

'She is very clear, that Lady. Clear in her soul. She's standing in a doorway, on the threshold between one life and another, and she's looking forward with happy eyes. She knows what will happen to her.'

I thought of what had inspired me to paint the Lady that way—of Christine standing in the doorway to the workshop, pleased to be weaving. It was so different from what Geneviève de Nanterre had just described that I had to suppress the urge to correct her.

'What about the Lady here, Madame?' I pointed to the Lady in A Mon Seul Désir. 'Doesn't she also leave one world for another?'

Geneviève de Nanterre was silent.

'I painted her especially for you, Madame, so that the tapestries aren't just about a seduction, but about the soul too. Do you see—you can start with this tapestry, of the Lady putting on her necklace, and go round the room to follow her seduction of the unicorn. Or you can go the other way, with the Lady bidding farewell to each different sense, and end with this tapestry, where she takes off her necklace to put it away—to let go of the physical life. Do you see that I've done that for you, Madame? When the Lady holds her jewels as she does, we don't know if she is putting them on or taking them off. It can be either. That is the secret I've made for you in the tapestries.'

Geneviève de Nanterre shook her head. 'The Lady looks as if she hasn't decided which she prefers—the seduction or the soul. I know which I prefer, and I would like to see her choice clearly made. It's better that the tapestries are of the seduction of the unicorn—they will go to my daughter eventually. The seduction will please her.' She gazed at me and I blushed.

'I'm sorry you don't like them, Madame.' I was indeed sorry. I thought I'd been very clever, but my cleverness had tripped me up.

Geneviève de Nanterre turned round, taking in all of the tapestries once more. 'They are very beautiful, and that is enough. Certainly Jean is pleased, even if he doesn't show it, and Claude will love them. To thank you for them I would like you to join us tomorrow night for the feast here.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Yes, the Feast of St Valentine. The day birds choose their mates.'

'So they say.'

'We shall see you here, then.' She gave me a look before turning away.

I bowed to her back. One of her ladies peeked round the doorway, and joined her mistress as they left.

I was alone with the tapestries then. I stood for a long time in the room, looking and wondering why they now made me melancholy.

I HAD NOT BEEN to a nobleman's feast before. Painters aren't usually invited to such things. Indeed, I wasn't sure why Geneviève de Nanterre had asked me to come. Quickly and at great expense I had a new tunic made—black velvet with yellow trim—and a cap to match. I cleaned my boots and washed myself, though the water was icy. At least when I arrived at the torch-lit house on the rue du Four, squires

let me in without blinking, as if I were a noble among others.

Three girls ran in and out of the crowd. The eldest was Claude's sister Jeanne, who had been looking into the well in the courtyard the day I first met Claude. The second resembled her and must be the youngest Le Viste girl. The smallest came up only to my knee and looked nothing like a Le Viste, though she was pretty in her way, with dark red ringlets all in a mess at her neck. In the crowd she got tangled in my legs and as I set her straight she scowled up at me under a heavy brow in a way that seemed familiar.

The room was crowded with guests, with *jongleurs* playing and dancing and tumbling, with squires bringing round wine and titbits—pickled quails' eggs, pork cutlets and meatballs.

Jean Le Viste stood at one end of the room, by the tapestry of Smell, dressed in a red fur-trimmed gown among other men wearing the same. They would be discussing King and Court, matters I was never much concerned with. I preferred Geneviève de Nanterre's end of the room, where I could watch the ladies in their brocades and their furs of mink and fox and rabbit. The mistress of the house herself was dressed quite simply in sky-blue silk and grey rabbit fur, and stood beside A Mon Seul Désir.

The tapestries were much admired, but though they made the room warm and softened the sound of so many people, they were not so striking in loud company as when I had been alone with them. I could see now that a battle with its clamour of horses and men would have better suited a feast room, whereas these ought to be hung in a lady's chamber. Jean Le Viste had been right after all.

I tried not to think about this too much, but drank as much spiced wine as the men pouring it would serve me. At first I stood alone and watched the tumblers and the ladies dancing. Then a noblewoman I'd once painted called me to her. After that it was easier, to talk and laugh and drink as I would if I were at the tavern.

When Claude entered wearing red velvet, surrounded by ladies—Béatrice among them—I felt my shoulders loosen and my arms flap at my sides like pieces of twine. I had been waiting for her to appear.

The room was crowded and I didn't think she had seen me. At least she gave no sign. She was thinner than when I'd seen her last. Her eyes were still like quinces but they were not as lively as they had been. They fastened onto her ladies rather than following the dancers, or she looked at something distant—perhaps at one of the *millefleurs* in Smell or in Taste across the room from her.

Béatrice did see me, and looked boldly with her dark eyes. She too

was thinner. She didn't lean over to her mistress and whisper and point, but stared at me until I looked away.

I didn't try to go up to Claude. I knew it would be futile. Someone would get in my way, the steward would be called to march me away and throw me into the street, perhaps with another beating. I knew this without being told. Now I knew why Geneviève de Nanterre had invited me. I had been brought here to be punished.

Soon the music and dancing stopped, and trumpets sounded for the meal to begin. Claude joined her parents and some others at the high table. The rest of the guests sat along trestle tables down the sides of the room. I found myself at the very end—the lowest place, farthest from Claude. Just behind me hung Taste. Across from me hung Sight, with Aliénor's sweet, sad face keeping me company.

A priest from Saint-Germain-des-Prés came to lead us in prayer. Then Jean Le Viste stood and held up his hand. He did not honey his words but spoke bluntly, so that when I heard it the wound was clean and deep. 'We are gathered here to announce my eldest daughter Claude's betrothal to Geoffroy de Balzac, a member of the Noblesse d'Epée and a premier *valet de chambre* of the King. We will be proud to call a member of such an honourable family our son.' He held out his hand and a young man with a brown beard stood up from the high table and bowed slightly to Jean Le Viste and to Claude, who kept her eyes fixed on the table before her. Geneviève de Nanterre did not bow her head, but looked down along the trestle table to me perched at the end. Now you are having your punishment, her look said. I dropped my eyes to my trencher, and saw that the bread had been carved with the initials CLV and GDB intertwined.

After that I did not listen to what Jean Le Viste said, though I raised my cup when everyone else did in toasts that I didn't hear.

As a boar covered with gold leaf was brought in, I knew I wouldn't stay to see the many courses announced, the drink and the food and the spectacle going on and on all night and into the next day. I had no taste for the feast. I stood up and, after a last glance at the tapestries—for I knew I would not see them again—I slipped away to the door. To get there I had to pass the high table, and as I did a movement caught my eye. Claude had brought her hand down on the table suddenly and her knife clattered to the floor. 'Oh!' she cried. One of her ladies went to fetch it but she stopped her with a laugh, the first merriment I had seen in her all evening. 'I'll get it,' she said, and dived under the table. I couldn't see her. The white tablecloth painted with Le Viste coats of arms fell to the floor, shielding everything behind it.

I waited a moment. No one seemed to notice me. Béatrice was standing behind her mistress's chair, talking to a man who was serving Geoffroy de Balzac. Geneviève de Nanterre was speaking to her future son-in-law. Jean Le Viste was looking my way but seemed to see straight through me. Already he didn't remember who I was. When he called over his shoulder for more wine I pulled my cap from my head and let it fall, then went on my knees to retrieve it. In a second I had hiked up the cloth and was under the table.

Claude was sitting in a ball, arms round her legs, chin on her knees. She smiled at me.

'Do you always have your *rendezvous* under tables, Mademoiselle?' I asked as I put my cap back on.

'Tables are very handy for hiding under.'

'Is that where you've hidden all this time, beauty? Under a table?'

Claude stopped smiling. 'You know where I've been. You never came for me.' She turned her cheek to her knee so that her face was hidden. All I could see was her red velvet headdress, beaded with pearls, her hair carefully tucked away under it.

'I didn't know where you were. How could I?'

Claude turned her face back to me. 'Yes, you did. Marie-Céleste said—' She stopped, doubt spreading over her brow.

'Marie-Céleste? I haven't seen her since the day I last saw you—when I was being beaten. Did you send a message with her?'

Claude nodded.

'I never got it. She lied to you if she said I got it.'

'Oh.'

'Damn her. Why would she lie?'

'She has her reasons. I was not so kind to her before.'

A greyhound strayed under the table, rooting around for scraps, and Claude reached over to pat it. When her sleeve fell back from her wrist I saw that it had been scraped raw, as if by angry fingernails that wanted cutting. I reached over and gently clasped her wrist. 'What has happened here, beauty? Have you hurt yourself?'

Claude pulled her wrist away. 'Sometimes it is the only thing that makes me feel. *Alors*,' she continued, scratching at the wounds, 'it doesn't matter, really. You couldn't have got me out.'

'Where were you?'

'In a place that is a paradise to Maman and a prison to me. But that is what a lady's life is, I've found.'

'Don't say that. You're not imprisoned now. Come with me. Run away from your *fiancé*.'

For a moment Claude's face lit up like the sun on the Seine, but as she thought about it more her face went dark again. Wherever she had been had changed her spirit. It was a sad thing to see.

'What about *mon seul désir*?' I asked softly. 'Have you forgotten that?'

Claude sighed. 'I have no desire now. That was Maman's. Thank you for the tapestries,' she added, gazing into the dog's eyes. 'Has anyone thanked you? They're beautiful, though they make me sad.'

'Why, beauty?'

She looked at me. 'They remind me of what I was like before, happy and free. Only the one where the unicorn lies in her lap is like me now; that Lady is sad and knows something of the world.'

I sighed. I seemed to have got all the Ladies wrong.

The tablecloth rippled then and the tiny red-haired girl crawled under the table. She had found the dog's tail and followed it back to its source. She showed no interest in us but patted the dog's back.

'Mind you, I did find one good thing in the prison.' Claude nodded at the girl. 'I brought her back with me. Nicolette, take the dog away. Go, now.' She gave the dog's rump a shove.

The girl and dog ignored her.

'She will be one of my ladies in waiting when she's grown,' Claude added. 'Of course she'll need training, but that's a long time away yet.'

I stared at the girl. 'Her name is Nicolette?'

Claude laughed as she had once done—a girlish laugh full of promise. 'I renamed her. We couldn't have two Claudes at the convent.'

She laughed again when I jerked my head so hard I banged it against the top of the table. I looked at the girl who was my daughter and then at Claude. For a moment I felt the old surge of desire push me towards her, and reached across to her.

I never found out if Claude would have let me touch her. Once more—as she had the last time Claude and I were under a table together—Béatrice poked her head into our hiding place. 'Mademoiselle, your mother wants you,' she said.

Claude made a face but got to her knees. '*Adieu*, Nicolas,' she said with a small smile. Then she nodded at Nicolette. 'And don't worry—I'll keep her with me always. Won't I, *ma petite*?' She scrambled out from under the table, Nicolette and the dog following her.

Béatrice was looking at me. 'I've got you,' she said. 'I had to live nine months in hell because of you. I made messages go astray because of you. I'm not going to let you go now.' She pulled her head away.

I crawled out from my hiding place, puzzling over her words, and stood up. No one noticed me. Jean Le Viste was talking to Geoffroy de

Balzac, his back to me. Geneviève de Nanterre was standing with Claude at the other end of the table. Béatrice was whispering in her ear.

Geneviève de Nanterre looked over at me. '*Bien sûr*,' she cried brightly, stepping over so that she stood between me and Béatrice. 'Nicolas des Innocents, how could I have forgotten you? Béatrice has told me she's tired of service and would prefer the life of an artist's wife. Of course it's not for me to arrange, as Béatrice is my daughter's lady now. What do you think, Claude—will you release Béatrice from service to you so that she may marry Nicolas des Innocents?'

Claude looked at her mother and then at me, her eyes bright with tears. We were both of us being punished.

'We will be sorry to lose you, Béatrice,' Geneviève de Nanterre added. 'But my daughter will give her permission, won't you, Claude?'

After a moment Claude gave a little shrug. 'I will, Maman. As you wish.' She did not look at me as her mother took Béatrice's hand and slipped it into mine, but fastened her eyes on the tapestry of Taste.

Myself, I did not look at the tapestries, nor at the nobles eating and drinking and laughing and dancing. I did not need to look at them to know that they would all be smiling.

EPILOGUE

Nicolas des Innocents was commissioned to design a stained-glass window for Notre Dame de Paris. He had three more children, none of them with Béatrice.

Claude Le Viste and Geoffroy de Balzac had no children. After he died in 1510 she married Jean de Chabannes. They also had no children. After her death the tapestries passed on to the family of her second husband.

Nicolette was Claude Le Viste's lady in waiting all her life.

Jean Le Viste died in 1501. After his death Geneviève de Nanterre entered the convent at Chelles.

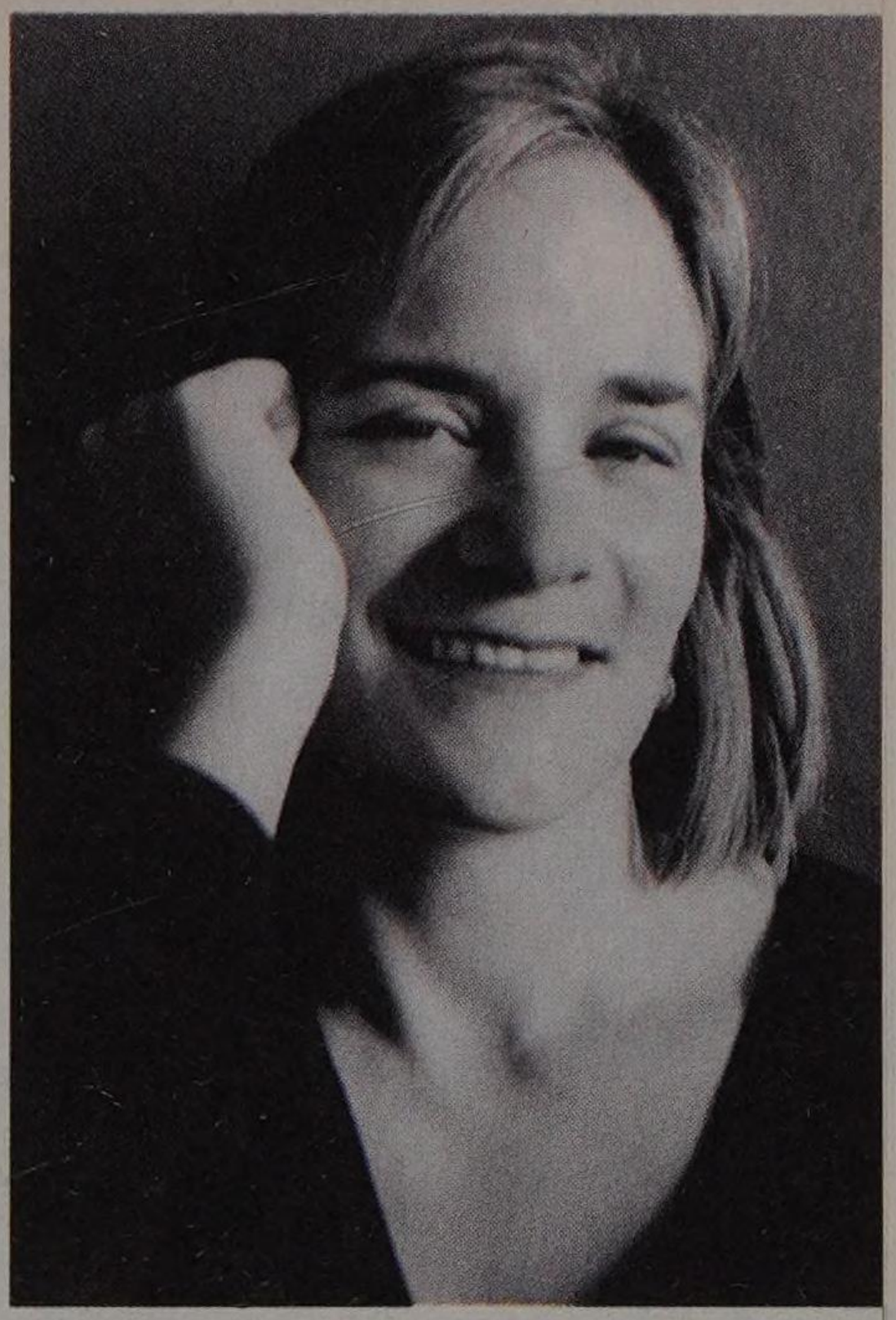
Philippe and Aliénor had three more boys. The first son and the youngest became painters. The other two became weavers.

Georges was offered several other commissions to weave unicorns. He turned them down. 'Too much trouble,' he said to Christine.

Christine wove a small *millefleur* tapestry for her daughter's belated trousseau. She did not weave for the workshop again.

Léon Le Vieux died in his own bed, his wife and children at his side.

TRACY CHEVALIER

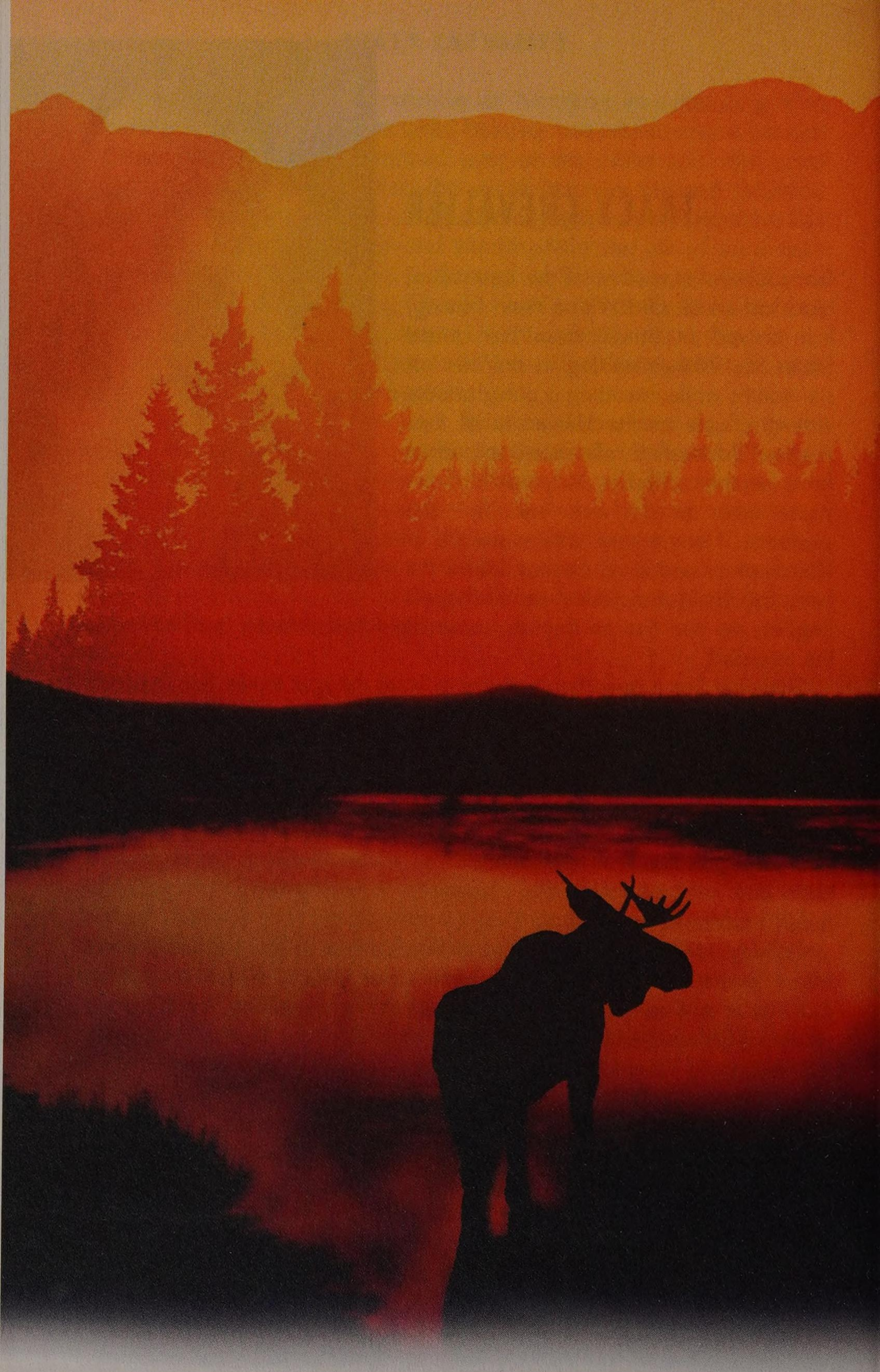


Tracy Chevalier, author of the best-selling historical novel, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, first arrived in Britain from the United States in 1984, intending to stay for just six months while attending a postgraduate writing course at the University of East Anglia. 'I'd been a reference-book editor for a number of years and I really didn't know what to do with my life,' she explains. 'I came over with a couple of friends and I ended up staying. I think I'm here for the duration, as my husband's English, my son has an English accent, and I've become used to being the outsider!'

Chevalier has a remarkable ability to bring the past to life. For *The Lady and the Unicorn*, her fourth book, she has again taken inspiration from history, detailing the creation of a series of beautiful fifteenth-century tapestries that hang in the Musée National du Moyen-Age in Paris. She can still recall her first sight of them. 'I was twenty and I remember being struck by the feeling of being in a quiet haven in a busy city where the tapestries effortlessly created their own world. The women in them had such presence and self-possession and elegance—at twenty (and even now, at forty!) I wanted some of that.

'I always feel there is more research I could have done. I still feel like that about Vermeer and it's been five years since I wrote *Girl With a Pearl Earring*! In a way, that's good—I can still learn something. I still have a whole lot of medieval books on the shelves in my study, sharing space with the new books I'm acquiring about William Blake, my next subject.'

And what are the pros and cons of her extended stay in Britain? 'I like the countryside and how there are public paths all over so you can walk almost anywhere. I like meals in pubs. I like the broad outlook and awareness of other countries close by. I like British humour and British modesty. Things I miss about the States? Space—big hallways, big kitchens, big yards, more parking spaces. I miss Graham crackers and fireflies. And people's friendliness to children. I miss American optimism.'



STEVE HAMILTON

BLOOD IS THE SKY

In the savage beauty of the vast forests of Ontario, Alex McKnight and his friend Vinnie LeBlanc, an Ojibwa tracker, are searching for a missing man.

Their friendship and courage are about to be put to the ultimate test . . .

ONE

I saw a lot of fires when I was a cop in Detroit. I was supposed to help secure the scene and then get the hell out of the way, but sometimes I'd stick around and watch the fire-fighters doing their work. I saw some real battles, but when they were done, the building would always be standing. That was the thing that got to me. The windows would be blown out, and maybe there'd be a big hole in the roof, but the building would still be there.

Years later, I watched a Lake Superior storm taking down a boathouse. When the storm let up, there was nothing left but a concrete slab covered with sand. It wasn't surprising. Anyone who lives up here knows that water is stronger than fire. But when water destroys, at least it cleans up after itself. It makes everything look new. It can even be beautiful.

Fire doesn't do that. When a fire is done, what's left is only half destroyed. It is charred and brittle. It is obscene. There is nothing so ugly in all the world as what a fire leaves behind.

That's why I had to start rebuilding the cabin. It was something I had to do. Even though the days were getting shorter. No man in his right mind would have started rebuilding in October. So of course I did.

I had already taken away most of the old wood, those logs that would have lasted another three hundred years if they hadn't burned. There was nothing now but the stone foundation, stripped

of the wooden floor, and the chimney, the last thing my father had made with his bare hands before he died. I knew that, when the snow came, the chimney would stand alone in the cold silence like a grave marker. I wasn't going to let that happen.

The rebuilding didn't start well. The man who said he'd be there on Monday with my white pine logs rolled up on Wednesday, acting like he had nothing to apologise for. He had one of those long flat-beds with a crane on it, with enough lifting power to set every log down as gently as a teacup. But it took him all morning to clear the truck, and he damn near knocked over the chimney in the process.

Then he stood there, hitching up his trousers as he looked around the clearing. 'What happened? Did it burn down?'

'It did.'

'Hell of a thing,' he said. 'You gotta be careful with those wood stoves.'

I let a few seconds tick by. 'It wasn't a wood stove,' I finally said. 'Somebody burned it down.'

It took a moment for that one to sink in. 'Are you shittin' me, man?'

'You don't have to believe it.'

'I suppose you're gonna rebuild this all by yourself, too.'

'I'm gonna try.'

'You're not thinking of starting this now, are you? It's October.'

'I'd have to be crazy, you mean.'

'Is what I'm saying, yeah.'

'I appreciate your concern,' I said. 'And I appreciate you bringing up my logs. You were only two days late. Have a good trip back.'

He was still shaking his head as he drove away. I listened to the distant sound of his truck as he headed south. When he was gone, there was nothing left to hear but a steady wind coming off the lake.

'Well, Pops,' I said to the wind, 'let's see if I remember how to do this.'

THIS WAS THE CABIN he had built in the summers of 1980 and 1981. It was his biggest and best. I helped him for a few weeks in that second year as I had many summers since the first time I came to Paradise, Michigan, aged seventeen. Six months after he'd finished his masterpiece he was dead. The cabin may have burned to the ground, but at least we had those summers.

Now, on a cold October day, I started all over again. I cut the sill logs first, the logs that would run along the bottom of each wall, then secured them to the foundation. I cut a groove along the outside

edge with the chain saw, just as he had taught me. When it rained, the water would collect in the groove and drip away instead of running down the foundation. Then I cut the grooves for the floor joists. I put rough plywood down for the time being—I'd put the nice hardwood floorboards down when the outside was finished.

That was the first day.

When the light was gone, I went down to the Glasgow Inn for dinner. My friend Jackie owns the place. If you ever find yourself in Paradise, just go to the one blinking light in the centre of town, then go north another hundred yards or so. It'll be there on the right. There's a fire going in the hearth every night, regardless of the weather, and there's a man there named Jackie Connery who looks like an old Scottish golf caddie. If you ask him the right way, Jackie will even risk his liquor licence and give you a cold Canadian beer.

I take that last part back. Those Canadian beers are just for me.

I FELT LIKE HELL the next morning. My hands were sore, my arms were sore, my legs were sore and my back was sore. Aside from that I was fine. I had my coffee and looked up at the dark clouds. Rain was the last thing I needed, because today was the day I'd start building the walls.

I scribed each log the way my father had done. I did most of the heavy cutting with the chain saw, stopping every half-hour to sharpen it. I used an axe to cut the notches, keeping both hands together as I swung it, like a baseball bat. That much he didn't have to teach me. You can't be accurate with your hands apart.

Of course, cutting the scarf just right is the hard part. Or as the old man liked to say, this is where you separated the men from the boys. The idea is to cut it so perfectly that one log will rest on top of the other with no daylight in between. If you do it right, you don't need any chinking. If you don't do it right, then you've got no business building a cabin in the first place.

The first log I tried cutting that morning, I didn't get right. The second log was worse. The third log you could have put in a carnival and charged people five dollars to come laugh at it.

The wind picked up. It looked like rain was coming. I kept working. I was halfway through the fourth log when the hornets attacked me. The nest was hanging from one of the birch trees. They had already been smoked out the night of the fire, the nest partially caved in by the spray of the fire hoses. They were trying to rebuild, just like I was, but they had run out of time. Now half crazed by the cold

weather, most of them near the end of their natural lives, they saw me moving around below them, rattling around with my chain saw. They decided to go down fighting.

I slapped two off the back of my neck, another off my arm. 'Crazy things! Get away from me!' The next one caught me right on the cheek and that was it for me. The day was already going bad enough.

I was going to soak the nest with gasoline and set it on fire. I stopped myself just in time. It wasn't worth it. Watching the nest burn, sending the rest of those hornets to hell. They'd all be dead in another week, anyway. It was a lesson I had taken most of my life to learn. Sometimes you have to let things go.

The rain came. The clouds stayed in the sky. I went back to work.

I HAD COME BACK up here in 1987. My marriage was over and I was off the police force, with a dead partner in the ground and a bullet in my chest. I came up here intending to sell off the land and the six cabins my father had built, but I didn't do it. Somehow the Upper Peninsula was just what I needed. It was cold and unforgiving, even in the heart of summer. There was a terrible beauty to the place, and I could be alone up here in a part of the world where being alone was the rule and not the exception. I moved into the first cabin, the cabin I had helped him build when I was seventeen. I stayed up here and lived day to day and never thought I'd have to face my past again.

That didn't work. It never does.

Hours after I called it a day, I could still feel the buzz of the chain saw in my hands. There was a deep ache in my shoulder, right where they had taken the other two bullets out.

'How's the cabin going?' Jackie said, as he slid a cold Canadian my way.

'It's a little slow.'

He nodded his head. He didn't say a word about how late it was in the season or how much of a fool I was. Jackie understood why I needed to do this.

'You know who could help you,' he said.

I knew. I took a long pull off the bottle and then set it back down on the bar. 'I've got to get some sleep,' I said. Then I left.

I was just as sore the next morning, but somehow everything felt different. It was all coming back to me, the way you let the chain saw and the axe do the work, the way you work with the grain of the log instead of fighting against it. The logs started fitting together the way they were supposed to. I had the walls two logs high by

lunchtime. Of course, that meant it was getting harder to wrestle the logs into position. Eventually I'd have to set up some kind of skyline. That would slow me down.

Hell, maybe Jackie was right. There was one man who could really help me. But I'd be damned if I was going to go ask him.

MY FATHER HAD BOUGHT all the land on both sides of this old logging road, nearly a hundred acres in all. He built the six cabins and lived in each one of them off and on over the years, renting out the others to tourists in the summer, hunters in the fall and snowmobilers in the winter. When I came up here and moved into the first cabin, I kept renting out the rest of them. It was a good way to stay busy without having to go anywhere.

A few years after I moved in, somebody bought a couple of acres next to my father's land. I was a little worried that the new owner might build a triple-decker summer home, with every tree knocked down so they could maybe get a view of the lake. But it didn't happen that way. It was one man, and I watched him build his own cabin by hand. If my father had been around to see it, he would have approved of this man's work.

I got to know him eventually. You don't live on the same road up here with one other person without running into each other. I'd plough the road for him. He'd give me some of the venison from his hunts. He didn't drink, so we never did that together, but we did share an adventure or two. I even played in goal one night for his hockey team. The fact that he was an Ojibwa Indian never got in the way of our friendship.

Until one day he had to make a choice.

I didn't hear his truck pull up. With the chain saw roaring away, I wouldn't have heard a tank battalion. I happened to glance at the road and saw his truck parked there. Vinnie Red Sky LeBlanc was standing next to it, watching me.

I shut the chain saw down and wiped my forehead with my sleeve.

'You're gonna go deaf,' he said. 'Where's your ear protection?'

'I left them around here someplace. Just can't find them.'

He shook his head at that, then walked right past me to the stacks of logs. Like many Bay Mills Ojibwa, you had to look twice to see the Indian in him. Yet there was a little extra width to his high cheekbones, and a certain calmness in his eyes when he looked at you.

'White pine,' he said.

'Of course.'

'Where'd it come from?'

'Place down near Traverse City.'

'Couple of these logs I wouldn't use on a doghouse,' he said. 'Like this one right here.'

'I know. I was gonna put that one aside.'

He slipped his hands under the log and lifted it. He was maybe three inches shorter than me, and thirty pounds lighter, but I wouldn't have wanted to fight the man, on the ice or off. He carried the log a few steps and tossed it in the brush.

'That'll be your waste pile,' he said.

'You don't have to do that, Vinnie. I know which ones are bad.'

He went over to the cabin, knelt down, and ran his hand along one of the logs. 'You know which ones are bad,' he said, 'and yet this one right here seems to be part of your wall already.'

'When did you become the county inspector?' I said.

He let that one go. 'Can I ask why you're doing this by yourself?'

'My father did it by himself.'

'Did he start building in October?'

'I know I'm not going to finish it. I just couldn't wait until spring.'

He smiled. 'Patience was never your strong suit.'

'Put yourself in my place, Vinnie,' I said. 'If somebody burned this down, what would you do?'

'First of all, I'd kill whoever did it.' He thought about it for a moment. 'Did you kill him?'

'No,' I said.

'But he's dead.'

'Yes.'

'OK, then. The next thing I'd do is rebuild the thing, as close as I could to the original.'

'Exactly.'

'But I wouldn't do it alone,' he said. 'Not with a friend down the road who knows twice as much about building cabins as I do.'

'Excuse me, twice as much? Since when?'

'Make that three times as much. I was trying to be kind.'

'Yeah, well, if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do.'

'You'll never even get to the roof,' he said. 'You want the snow to pile up in here all winter?'

'Are you saying you want to help me?'

'Your father's spirit sent me,' he said. 'He knows what this thing would look like if you did it yourself.'

'Ah, Indian humour,' I said. 'I've really been missing that.'

'Let me go get my stuff,' he said. 'I'll see if I have an extra pair of earmuffs, too.'

'Yeah, get me those earmuffs,' I said. 'I have a feeling I'll be needing them now.'

That's how I got my help. That's how we started being friends again.

We worked until the sun went down. I offered to buy him dinner at the Glasgow, but he took a pass. He said he was going over to the reservation to see his mother. The next morning, he was on the site before I was, spot-peeling logs with his drawknife.

'Let me ask you something,' I said when I pulled up. 'Aren't you supposed to be out in the woods this month?' Vinnie's regular job was dealing blackjack over at the Bay Mills Casino, but every fall he'd make extra money working as a guide for hunters.

'I'd rather be doing this,' he said, 'so I asked for some time off. Don't worry about it, Alex. Just help me peel these things.'

'Those are already peeled, Vinnie.'

'By what, a machine? Here, let me show you the right way to do it.'

Somehow, I managed not to kill him that day. When we got to work, we found a good rhythm and added three more rows to the walls. Not a word was said about what had happened between us.

When we had run out of daylight, I invited him to have dinner at the Glasgow again. This time he said yes.

Jackie did a double take when we walked into the Glasgow together. 'Well, look at this,' he said.

'Two steaks,' I said. 'Medium rare. You know the rest.'

'Good evening to you, too,' he said. 'I'm just fine, thanks for asking.' If he was genuinely mad at me, it didn't stop him from opening a cold Canadian and sliding it my way.

'It's good to see you,' Vinnie said. 'It's been a while.'

'Don't tell me,' Jackie said. 'You're showing Alex how to build his cabin. Am I right?'

'It was too painful to watch,' Vinnie said. 'I had to step in.'

'You guys are hilarious,' I said. 'Just keep it up.'

That's the way it went, on a cold October night. It had been another cold night, not that long ago, when the woman had come to me. She was an Ojibwa, someone Vinnie knew, someone he had grown up with on the reservation. She was in trouble and I did what I could to help her. In the end, Vinnie was involved, and that's when he had to make his choice—whether to trust me or his own people. He chose his own people. I had no right to expect him to choose me, but it hurt just the same. It had stayed there between us ever since.

Until this night. We sat by the fire and talked about the cabin. We pretended that nothing had ever changed. Maybe that's how you get past it. You pretend until it's real.

He was there to help me the next day, the day after that, and then the next. I bought him dinner every night. Hell, it was the least I could do. We were putting those walls up so fast, we'd actually have a shot at getting the roof on before it snowed. That's what I thought, anyway. And then, of course, it did snow. It wasn't much, just a few flurries overnight that turned to rain in the morning, but it was enough to knock us out of the game for the rest of the day. Vinnie ran off to do something on the reservation, and I checked on the renters in the other cabins. It was bow season in Michigan. Bow season was easy, because bow hunters are the true gentlemen of the sport. They don't make a racket, and they keep the cabins clean. Firearm hunters were usually OK, although I'd still get my share of drunken clowns. Snowmobilers, of course, were the worst of all. Just one more reason to dread the winter, and to hope like hell that the snow wasn't coming for good.

It wasn't. Not yet, anyway. The next morning the sun came out. When I went to the cabin site, I was surprised to see Vinnie wasn't there. An hour later, I started wondering. By lunchtime I thought I'd head down the road and check on him. His truck was gone so I went down to the Glasgow for some of Jackie's beef stew and a Canadian.

'Where's your man?' Jackie said as he served me.

'You got me. He didn't show up today.'

He gave me a look. 'Whattsa matter, trouble in Paradise?'

'No trouble. I just don't know where he is.'

Vinnie walked in just then. He came to the bar and sat down.

'Give the man some beef stew,' I said.

'No, thanks,' he said. That's when I knew something was wrong. If you have any appetite at all, you don't turn down Jackie's beef stew.

'What's going on?' I said.

'I'm sorry I wasn't around today. Something sort of came up.'

'You don't have to apologise,' I said. 'Hell, it's not like I'm paying you anything.'

Vinnie thought about it. 'You realise,' he said, 'that I'm the one paying you. For what happened. I'm settling my debt to you.'

'You don't owe me anything,' I said. 'Now, for God's sake, are you gonna tell me what's wrong?'

He sat there for a long moment, while Jackie looked back and forth between us, clearly expecting the worst.

'It's my brother Tom,' he finally said.

I didn't know a hell of a lot about Tom LeBlanc. I knew he was a few years younger than Vinnie, and that he had caused his family enough trouble to make Vinnie look like the golden boy. The last time I had seen Tom, in fact, was just before he had gone off to serve two years at Kincheloe Jail.

'What's the problem?' I said. I knew Tom was out on parole now, and saying all the right things about staying straight. But hell, if he was in trouble again, it wouldn't exactly shock me.

'He was on a hunting trip in Ontario. He was supposed to be back a couple of days ago.'

'And he didn't make it back?'

'No.'

'You don't think—'

'What, that he's passed out in some bar in Canada? Is that what you mean?'

'Vinnie, come on.'

'It's different this time, Alex.'

Here it comes, I thought. He's been going to the meetings; he's a changed man. The whole speech. That's what I expected.

That's not what I got.

'It's kind of a long story,' Vinnie said. 'Bottom line, I'm the one who let him get involved in this. It's all on me.'

'Who did he go with, Vinnie? Did anyone else get back yet?'

'Look, can we talk about this on the way? I've got to go to the reservation.'

'We're both going?'

'Yeah, I need you to go with me. For protection.'

'Protection?' Jackie looked at me and threw his towel in the sink.

'It's my mother,' Vinnie said. 'I figure if you're there, she'll be less likely to kill me.'

I knew that was just a line, but I went with him anyway. We took my truck and he sat there on the passenger's side, looking out at the trees. After a few minutes, he gave me the rest of the story.

'This man called Tom,' he said. 'From Detroit. He said he had heard he was a good guide, that he knew how to turn a hunt into a real party. Tom told him that he wasn't doing too many hunts any more. He recommended me. He told them I was the real deal.'

I knew that was Vinnie's first love. There were other hunting guides who could track animals for you, and then field-dress and tag them if you were lucky enough to bag one. Vinnie would do all that

and then tell you the stories his grandmother had told him about the land and the sky, the animals and the seasons. The four points on the compass and how they got their names. The manitous, the spirits of Ojibwa mythology. Vinnie could take an ordinary hunting trip and turn it into summer camp for grown-ups.

Of course, he used his Ojibwa name on these hunts—Misquogeezhig, which in English is 'Red Sky'.

'So why didn't they take you?' I said.

'They told him he was the guy they wanted, and then they said something about him and peace pipes.'

'Peace pipes? Oh no, wait a minute—'

'Yeah. He got the idea. He told them he didn't do that kind of thing any more.'

'OK, so then what?'

'They say they want him and they'll pay him a thousand dollars.'

'A thousand dollars for a week in the woods?'

'And Tom says no. He really can't do it. So they say OK, we'll pay you two thousand dollars.'

'Two thousand?'

'So Tom says no, and why are they even asking him to do a hunt in Canada, anyway? In fact, the Canucks would have a cow if they found out these guys from America were bringing their own guide with them. They probably wouldn't even let them go out.'

'What did this guy say about that?'

'He said, don't worry, we'll take care of it. And then he offered Tom three thousand dollars.'

'Good God.'

'And Tom said, where do you want to pick me up?'

'Vinnie, who is this guy?'

He shook his head. 'Tom said his name was Albright. He didn't say what he did for a living, but it sounded like he was the kind of guy who usually gets what he wants. He said he had four other guys who just wanted to cut loose in the woods.'

'I know that one,' I said. 'I get the "cut-loose" type staying in the cabins during firearm season. They stay up all night drinking and then they go out the next morning and shoot anything that moves. They all want that big buck so they can mount his head on the wall.'

'Actually, this was a moose hunt. That's why they were going to Canada. They'd done the deer thing. They wanted the big game.'

'Moose. Even better. Is it firearm season up there already?'

'Yeah, it's a lot earlier in Canada.'

'OK, so for three thousand he said yes. When did they pick him up?'
'Saturday before last.'
I did the maths in my head. 'Before I started working on the cabin.'
He nodded. 'The problem is, Tom is pretending to be me.'
'Why is he pretending to be you?'
Vinnie didn't say anything. He watched the trees go by.
'Oh, wait a minute,' I said. 'Don't tell me.'
'It would have violated his parole.'
I just about drove into the lake right there. 'Oh, that's beautiful,' I said. 'This is getting better by the minute.'

'He's not supposed to leave the country.'

'Yeah, no kidding. When they've already caught you bringing a twenty-pound bag over the bridge, they kinda like you to stay off it.'

'I know it doesn't look like such a good idea right now,' he said. 'The rest of my family sure doesn't think so.'

We turned off Lakeshore Road onto the Bay Mills Reservation. If there wasn't a sign there to tell you, you wouldn't know you were on Indian land. It looked just like any other middle-class housing development, with raised ranches on either side of the road. The road to Mission Hill, with the old burial ground at the top, would have been the first clue that you were in a different kind of place.

'So he was due back when?' I said. 'A couple of days ago?'

'Yeah, they should have dropped him off on their way back.'

'Do you have this guy's phone number?'

'Tom gave me Albright's cellphone number. I've left a couple of messages, but haven't heard back.'

'So maybe he hasn't got them yet,' I said. 'Maybe they're just still up there.'

'It's a fly-in hunt, Alex. They take you to the cabin, then come back for you a week later. By then you're ready to come home, believe me.'

'So where did they go? Isn't there a lodge there or somewhere they take off from?'

'I've been trying,' he said. 'Nobody's answering. I know the phone service is kind of unpredictable up there, but damn, it just gives me a bad feeling.'

'But not bad enough to call the police?'

He thought about it for a moment. 'You know what'll happen if I do that. If they find out Tom's up there, he'll go back to prison.'

The driveway had four cars in it already, so I pulled off onto the edge of the road.

'More cousins,' Vinnie said as he got out. 'This will be fun.'

I followed him round to the back door. As he opened it, the heat and noise hit us. There were at least twenty people in the kitchen, some men sitting at the table, some women holding young children. One of the men stood up and put his hand on Vinnie's shoulder.

'You've met my cousin Buck,' Vinnie said to me.

The man shook my hand. As he looked at me, his face told me absolutely nothing.

'I seem to remember,' I said.

Vinnie introduced me round to the rest of the room. It was all a blur after the first three or four names. Without saying a word, one of Vinnie's uncles poured me a cup of coffee.

'Your mother is in the bedroom,' Buck said to Vinnie. 'She wants to see you.'

Vinnie asked me to wait out here in the kitchen. He went down the hallway like a man walking his last mile.

A couple of kids ran into the room and round the table. A woman yelled at them, while another woman next to her rocked a baby in her arms. That baby could obviously sleep through anything.

Nobody looked at me. Not once. I shifted back and forth on my feet, looked out of the window at the cold, hard ground in the back yard. This is what Vinnie left, I thought. A house like this, on land owned by the tribe. All this family around him. Even if he lived in another house on the reservation, the family would be there. That's the way it works here. Your door is always open. Some days, I thought it was a great thing. Today it was making me dizzy.

Vinnie had moved off the reservation and his family still hadn't accepted it, even though he made a point of spending most of his free time there. Hell, maybe they blamed me for it, like I was the one who kept him there, in his cabin in Paradise, living away from his family, all by himself like a lonely white man.

I stood there for another few uncomfortable minutes, until Vinnie finally poked his head back in the room and beckoned me down the hallway. 'What's going on?' I said.

'She wants to talk to you. She wants to ask you a couple of questions.' He led me down to the master bedroom and opened the door.

Vinnie's mother walked towards me. She was a large woman, round and soft around the edges, with big brown eyes. She was the epicentre of the whole family—hell, probably the entire reservation. She carried herself like she had long ago accepted the responsibility.

'Mrs LeBlanc,' I said, taking her hand.

'Alex,' she said. 'It's good to see you. Please sit down.'

She steered me into the one chair in the room, and then sat herself down on the edge of the bed. Vinnie stood in the doorway.

'I appreciate your coming down here,' she said. 'I hope it wasn't too much trouble.'

'No trouble at all, ma'am.'

'You know my son Thomas is missing.'

'I wouldn't say he's missing yet, ma'am. Vinnie says he's just a couple of days overdue.'

'Yes, from this hunting trip,' she said. 'With these men we don't know. He's my youngest child. He's already had his share of trouble.'

'I know,' I said. 'But there could be many explanations for why he's not back. I don't think there's any reason to be worried yet.'

She waved that away like so much smoke in the air. 'You know,' she said, 'when my oldest son was born, my husband's mother asked me to call him Misquogeezhig. You know what that means?'

'Red Sky.'

'Yes. It's actually a very peculiar name.'

I was about to make a remark about that, but held my tongue.

'It comes from the Waubunowin, the Society of the Dawn. That's what the Red Sky is, you know—the eastern sky when the sun comes up at dawn. The Waubunowin, they were outcasts, and most of the tribe were afraid of them. When my mother-in-law asked me to give this name to my first-born, I was not happy. I thought it meant that my son would grow up one day to be an outcast himself.'

I looked up at Vinnie. He did not move.

'My mother-in-law said to trust her. So I did. That is how Vincent was given the name Misquogeezhig.'

'For what it's worth,' I said, 'I think it's a good name.'

'Yes, well, then I had two daughters. My mother-in-law had no interest in naming them. So I thought to myself, this is good. She is done with the naming of my children. But then I had my other son, Thomas. And she said to me, you must name him Minoonigeezhig, which means Pleasing Sky.' She leaned closer to me. 'Pleasing Sky is the sky of the west,' she said. 'It is the end of the day. The end of life. I always thought it was an unlucky name, Alex. I never should have given it to him.'

'Mrs LeBlanc—'

'No, don't tell me I'm being a silly old woman.'

'I wasn't going to say that.'

'Perhaps not. But you think that.'

'Please,' I said. 'I don't understand why you're telling me all this.'

'I'm asking you to go with Vincent,' she said.

It took a moment to sink in. When it did, I knew I was committed. There was no way I could sit in that room with that woman and have it turn out any other way.

'I want the two of you to find him,' she said. 'Prove me wrong. Go and find my son with the unlucky name. Bring him home.'

TWO

It was still dark when Vinnie knocked on the door. I let him in and poured him a cup of coffee while I finished dressing.

A few minutes later, we were in my truck heading for Lakeshore Road, just as we had done the day before. But this time we didn't stop on the reservation. At this hour the only signs of life came from the Bay Mills Casino. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to gamble before dawn on a cold October morning, but there were enough cars in the parking lot to prove me wrong.

When we left the reservation, it was a straight shot down Three Mile Road into Sault Ste Marie—or the 'Soo', as the natives call it. We got onto Route I-75 and headed over the International Bridge, passing by the Algoma Steel Foundry Works. With the sun just starting to come up, and the fires burning in the sintering furnaces, the whole scene was like one of the outer rings of hell.

'Get your licence ready,' I said as we came up to the Canadian customs booth.

'Little problem,' Vinnie said.

I looked over at him. 'What is it?'

'Tom's got my licence.'

'You're kidding me.'

'We decided he might need it. He looks enough like me.'

'This is beautiful,' I said. I pulled up to the waiting line. There was one car in front of us. Going through customs can be a breeze, or it can be a pain in the ass, depending on who you've got in the booth.

'You got another ID, right?'

He just looked at me.

'You gave Tom all your credit cards?'

'I gave him my wallet, Alex. The whole thing.'

The car in front of me finally pulled away.

'Pretend you're sleeping,' I said. I started to pull forward. 'We're going in, Vinnie. Do your dead man act or we'll be stuck here all day.'

He did what he was told, dropping his head against the far side of the car and closing his eyes. As I pulled in front of the booth, the man looked at me, then at Vinnie, and then back at me.

'Identification, sir?'

I pulled out my licence. He gave it a quick glance.

'And your friend?'

'He's down for the count,' I said.

The man's eyes narrowed. 'Your business in Canada, sir?'

'Just taking him home,' I said.

'He's Canadian?'

'I'm afraid so. He's one of yours.'

'Think you could slip his wallet out from underneath him, sir?'

'His wallet's long gone,' I said. 'Lost it. Or had it stolen. He's had kind of a rough night. When I closed the bar, I thought maybe I'd do the right thing, make sure he got back where he belonged.'

'You own a bar, sir?'

'Don't I wish,' I said. 'I just work there a few nights a week.'

'Which bar would that be, sir?'

'Glasgow Inn. You ever been there?'

'No, sir. This is all part of the service, eh?' The man was loosening up a little bit. He was even starting to sound like a Canadian.

'Like I said, just trying to do the right thing.'

'Any alcohol or firearms in your vehicle?'

'No,' I said. It felt good to say one thing that wasn't a lie.

'Have a good morning,' he said.

Vinnie waited until we were a hundred yards past the booth. 'That was real cute,' he finally said. 'You had fun with that one.'

'Matter of fact.'

I could tell he was about to say something else. He stopped himself and just shook his head. He didn't say a word as we made our way through the quiet streets of Soo Canada. It's a large city by Canadian standards, about four times bigger than Soo Michigan.

'You need a doughnut?' I said.

He shook his head.

'You gonna be this way all the way up there?'

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat. 'You know how it is with us Indians,' he said. 'One bad night and we're down for the count.'

We took Route 17 north, out of the city and up the Lake Superior

coastline. The fog was still heavy on the water as we rounded Batchawana Bay. An hour later, we passed through a small town called Montreal River, and then it was another hour to make our way through the Lake Superior Provincial Park. There was nothing but trees and an occasional glimpse of the lake.

A little after nine, Vinnie picked up my cellphone. 'We still get a signal up here?'

'I imagine,' I said. 'On this road, anyway. Try it.'

He turned it on and dialled a number. 'I'm gonna try Albright's number again.' He listened for a short while, then hung up. 'He's not picking up.'

'You said you left a message last time?'

'Yeah, I asked him to call my mother's number. I said I was a member of Vinnie's family, and was wondering why he hadn't come back home yet.'

'You don't think you should come clean?'

'Does it really matter who they think he is? Either way, they should have brought him back three days ago.'

'Tell me again. You don't know anything else about this Albright guy? Where he works?'

'No, I really don't. All Tom told me was that his name was Red Albright, that he and four other guys were heading for this cabin on Lake Peetwaniquot, and that they'd pick him up on the way.'

'Where, at his house?'

'They met him at the duty-free shop by the bridge. They said they'd be driving a black Chevy Suburban. I drove him over there.'

'But you didn't see them. I mean, you weren't there at the duty-free, hiding behind the cigarettes or anything?'

'No, Alex. I was not hiding behind the cigarettes.'

'You don't know anything else about these men, other than that they were going to pay your brother three thousand dollars?'

'Every one of my uncles and cousins has asked me that,' he said. 'And my mother has asked me that maybe seven times. The answer is no, I don't know anything else. And I'll give you the answer to your next question before you even ask it. Yes. Yes, I'm an idiot.'

'That one I didn't need to ask,' I said. 'So try the lodge again. Maybe their phone works today.'

'Maybe it does,' he said, punching in the number. After a moment, he hit the END button. 'It still doesn't go through.'

We rode on another few minutes, through more trees. I could see a large bird, maybe a hawk, circling over the road ahead.

'So when do you call the police?' I said. 'I mean, I'm just wondering.'

He looked out of the window. 'I want to find him and bring him back home. Without getting him in big trouble.'

'And if you can't?'

'Then I call the police.'

'Fair enough.'

We kept going. Four hours had passed. As we left the park, we saw signs for Wawa, the closest thing to a real town we'd see that day.

'You getting hungry yet?' he said.

'You read my mind. We'll stop in Wawa, get some gas. See if they have a decent place to eat.'

The first thing we saw was a goose. It was a good twenty feet tall, and it was standing on a pedestal that had to be another ten feet. A giant goose-head thirty feet in the air, looking down at you—that's apparently how you know you're in Wawa. There was another goose, this one only five feet tall, in front of the first store we saw.

'They seem to have a thing about geese in this town,' I said.

'Where do you think the name comes from?'

I thought about it. 'Wawa means goose?'

'In Ojibwa, yes.'

'Now I know.' I drove by a couple of fast-food places and pulled up in front of a bar that didn't seem to have a name. 'You don't mind stopping at a bar, do you?'

I knew Vinnie didn't drink, but I'd be damned if I came all this way up into Canada without having a Molson. We got out of the truck and stretched, looking and sounding like two men who'd been driving since well before the sun came up. There were only two other vehicles in the parking lot—a truck that looked about as old as mine, and an Impala that may have been white one day, long ago.

When we stepped inside, we saw a bar and six empty stools. The man behind the stick looked up at us and put down his magazine. Besides him, there were two men on the other side of the room, playing one of those barroom bowling games where you slide the metal puck down the wooden chute. There was a pool table, and a jukebox that, thankfully, wasn't making a sound. Everywhere else, on every wall, there were photographs, nothing but men standing next to dead animals, mostly deer, all of them hanging upside-down, tongues falling out of open mouths. Suddenly I didn't feel so hungry.

'Come on in, gentlemen,' the man at the bar said. He was a big one. 'What can I get ya, eh?'

'You serve food in here?'

'Damn right we do. You in the mood for some nice venison stew?'

Vinnie and I both sneaked another look at the pictures on the wall. 'You don't actually hunt deer around here, do you?' I said.

The man looked at us for a moment and then started laughing. 'I thought you were serious.'

'How about a couple of cheeseburgers,' I said. 'One Molson and one 7-Up.'

The two men playing the little bowling game had stopped to watch us come in. 'Where are you boys from?' one of them said. He wore a Maple Leafs jersey. His nose was taped up, and there were purple bruises running under both eyes. His friend was wearing an orange hunting jacket, with the licence still pinned to the back.

'Michigan,' I said.

'You up here hunting?'

'Nope, other business.'

'Other business,' the one with the taped-up face said to the one in the hunting jacket. 'What the hell does that mean?'

The bartender brought our drinks over and the two men went back to their bowling game. The pins were attached to the machine from above, and you had to slide the puck over little sensors to make them flip up. They apparently thought you needed to slide the puck as hard as you could, and that you needed to swear at it very loudly.

'You gotta excuse those boys,' the bartender said. 'They had a little run-in yesterday and they're still buzzing.'

'I noticed the broken nose,' I said.

'A couple of strangers came in here. One of them had a real nose on him so these two clowns start making jokes. You know, like "Tell us another lie, Pinocchio," real intelligent stuff like that. These guys take it for about two minutes before the guy with the nose stands up and hits Stan right in the face. Says, "Here, let's see what your nose looks like tomorrow." And the other guy, hell, he's about twice as big, so Brian wasn't gonna step in.'

'Yeah, I'm so lucky having somebody to watch my back,' the man with the broken nose said. 'He's a real friend.'

The other man just stood there with a bottle of beer in his hand. He still hadn't said a word.

'And this game is a piece of shit, too.'

'Will you two knock it off?' the bartender said without turning round. 'Ain't you got nothing better to do than torment me every day of the week and get in fights with the customers?'

'We don't have "other business" to do like these fellas,' the man

said. 'We're not "other business" kind of guys, know what I mean?'

'What the hell are you talking about?' the bartender said, finally turning round.

'Ask the Lone Ranger and Tonto here,' the man said.

I turned on my stool and looked at him. He and his buddy went back to their game. Vinnie sat next to me as cool as an ice sculpture. I knew he had a fuse about seven miles long, and that no matter what they said, it would get to me a lot sooner than it would get to him.

'Don't mind those morons,' the bartender said as he served up the cheeseburgers. 'They're the only two in town, believe me.'

'Just our luck,' I said. We ate our burgers. I drank my beer and had another one.

I could feel their eyes on our backs. When we were done, I turned round again and watched them slide their stupid little puck down the board. 'Who's winning?' I said.

'Machine's broken,' the man said. 'It don't keep score any more.'

'Why don't you keep score yourself?'

They looked at me like I was from Mars.

'You know,' I said, 'I was wondering why you guys weren't playing pool. Now I understand. Pool's too complicated.'

'You wanna try me, old man?' he said. He looked like he meant it, even with his broken nose. His partner wasn't so sure.

Before I could say another word, I felt Vinnie's hand on my shoulder. 'Come on,' he said. 'We're leaving.'

'That's right,' the man said. 'Go do your "other business" with your Indian boyfriend.'

I would have taken him apart right there, but Vinnie had other ideas. 'Come on, it ain't worth it.'

He left some money on the bar and steered me out of there and into the truck.

'Put the key in and drive away,' he said.

I did as he said, sending a spray of gravel behind us. We had to double back through town to get back to Route 17, so the giant goose was there once again to say goodbye to us.

'Vinnie,' I said, a couple of miles later, 'doesn't it even bother you when people say stuff like that?'

'Who says it doesn't? I just don't get in fights over it.'

'I was sticking up for you, you know. That Lone Ranger and Tonto business was insulting.'

'That was for both of us,' he said.

'No, the Lone Ranger was a hero.'

'So was Tonto.'

'He was the trusty sidekick,' I said. 'Believe me, this is one thing I know about. That was my favourite show when I was a kid.'

'Of course,' Vinnie said. 'The Lone Ranger. That explains a lot.'

AN HOUR AND A HALF after we left Wawa, we came to a little town called White River. The Canadian Pacific Railroad crossed the road here. We sat and watched the freight cars go by for ten minutes.

Route 17 turned west in this town, heading back to the upper shores of Lake Superior. We took a right turn on Route 631. We had to keep going north, as far as the roads would take us.

'I'm gonna try Albright again,' Vinnie said. He punched the numbers and waited. No answer. He left a message this time, letting him know that we were in Canada. He left my cellphone number and told him to call the second he got in.

'I hope that went through,' he said as he hung up. 'The signal's getting pretty weak up here.'

We finally reached the end of the line, which in this case was the Trans-Canada Highway. We could turn left and head west to Longlac and then Geraldton, or we could turn right and head east to Hearst and then Kapuskasing. After eight hours of driving, we had gone as far north as we could go. From here it was nothing but wilderness, all the way up past the Albany River, through the Polar Bear Provincial Park, to the shores of Hudson Bay.

'Which way?' I said.

'I think left.'

'You think?'

'I'm pretty sure Tom said west.'

'So how were you supposed to find this place?' I said. 'I mean, if you were with these guys—'

'If I was with them, they'd know exactly where to go. Albright had the exact directions.'

'OK, OK,' I said. 'I get it. Let's give it a shot.'

I took the left and drove west down the Trans-Canada. About twenty minutes later, we saw a gravel road heading off to the right.

'Think that's it?' I said.

'Let's try,' he said.

I took the gravel road and held on tight as it twisted its way through the forest. It was one blind turn after another as I fishtailed the truck on the loose gravel.

'Take it easy, Alex.'

'Who are we gonna hit?' I said, turning the wheel hard.

'Look out!'

I slammed on the brakes and felt the truck start to slide.

'Son of a bitch!'

We came to rest with all four wheels in half-frozen mud. The moose stood there in the middle of the road, all gangly legs and long nose, looking at us with mild interest.

'That would have been great,' I said, as I put the truck in reverse. 'We come all the way up here and get killed by a moose.'

'Can you get out of this?'

I gave it some gas. The wheels spun. I tried putting it back in drive, to see if I could rock our way out. The wheels spun again. I turned the key and we sat for a while, listening to the engine cool off.

'Now what?' Vinnie finally said, as the moose stepped slowly off the road and into the woods.

'Try the phone.'

He turned it on. 'It's not getting a signal now.'

'I was afraid of that. We're too far north.'

'We'll have to walk,' he said. 'Maybe the lodge is right here.'

'I'm sure it is,' I said as I opened my door. 'The Lone Ranger never got lost when Tonto was around.'

WE STARTED WALKING north. The air was a hell of a lot colder up here. I zipped up my coat.

'What's the Ojibwa word for moose?' I said.

'Moozo.'

I nodded. 'Wawa and moozo. So far, it's a pretty silly-sounding language, Vinnie.'

'I just realised what your Ojibwa name should be,' he said.

'What's that?'

'Madawayash.'

'What's it mean?'

He smiled. 'I'll tell you later.'

We walked. The road twisted its way through more trees and more marshland with grass growing eight feet tall.

'Tyre tracks,' Vinnie said, kicking at the ground.

'Recent?'

'Looks like it.'

'What kind of vehicle?'

He looked at me. 'One with tyres.'

'Was the driver right-handed or left-handed?'

'You're funny.'

'Come on, you're the Indian guide. Where are the tracking skills?'

We had walked maybe two more miles, when we rounded a bend and the road ended. There were three vehicles parked among the trees—one Jeep and two pick-up trucks—and beyond the trees we could see blue water.

'I think we found it,' I said. 'I'm guessing this is Lake Peetwaniquot.'

'Let's go see who's here,' Vinnie said.

We walked down the path, the trees opening up to a clearing and a lodge overlooking the lake. As we got closer we could see a couple of smaller sheds set back in the woods, and a long dock. There was a floatplane tied up to it, and two aluminium motorboats.

'Hello!' Vinnie said. The sound died in the cold wind. No answer.

'There's got to be somebody here,' I said.

We walked down to the lake and out onto the dock, passing a large weighmaster's scale and several propane tanks. There was no sound but our heavy footsteps on the wood, the wind blowing in off the lake and the plane's left float working up and down against the rubber bumpers on the dock.

Vinnie was looking back at the dark, seemingly empty window of the lodge. 'Let's see if anybody's in there,' he said.

We were halfway there when the man stepped out of one of the sheds at the edge of the woods.

Blood. That's all I saw at first. The man was covered in blood.

'Whatcha boys need?' he said.

'You own this place?' Vinnie said.

That broke the spell. I saw the man clearly, with the full-length canvas apron, the gloves.

'Nah, you want Helen,' he said. 'I just work here.'

'You're butchering something?' Vinnie said.

The man looked down at his gloves. 'A moose,' he said. 'What a goddamn mess.'

A woman peeked her head round the door behind him. You could tell in a second they'd been married for ever. 'Who is it, Ron?'

'Couple of men,' he said. He didn't introduce us to her. Instead he just turned round and went back to her. They disappeared into the shed and closed the door.

'I take it that woman in the shed wasn't Helen,' Vinnie said. 'You suppose she's in the lodge?'

'Let's go see.'

We went up the path to the front door of the cabin, climbing a set

of rickety wooden steps that desperately needed a new coat of paint. We knocked on the front door. Nobody answered.

Vinnie looked at me, knocked on the door again and then opened it. The room we stepped into was a lot nicer than what I had expected, based on how run-down the place looked from the outside. A big wooden table stood in the centre of the room, with eight hand-carved chairs. A great moose-head looked down at us from the back wall, its rack of antlers as wide as a piano.

'Hello!' Vinnie said. 'Anybody here?'

'Back here!' a voice said. 'Come on in!'

There was a door in the far wall of the room, leading to an office. The woman inside was fiddling with the antenna on a small television. Where she expected to get a signal from, I couldn't even guess.

'We're sorry to bother you,' Vinnie said.

The woman turned round and looked at us. 'Oh!' she said. 'I thought you were the men back from town.'

'We're sorry to bother you, ma'am,' I said.

'It's all right,' she said. 'You just surprised me.' She had brown eyes, that was the first thing I noticed. She was about my age, with brown hair just starting towards grey, and she was wearing a red flannel shirt a couple of sizes too big. My overall impression was a nice lady who was a little tough, too.

'The couple outside told us to come and see you,' I said. 'They said you owned the place. We tried calling you, but I think you have a problem with your phone.'

'I'm Helen St Jean,' she said, standing up. She shook Vinnie's hand and then mine. 'Yeah, that phone's been out for a week. If it wasn't so late in the season, I'd get it fixed.'

Vinnie spoke up. 'My name is Tom LeBlanc,' he said. 'This is my friend Alex McKnight.'

'That was Ron and Millie you met outside,' she said. 'He was probably still working on that moose.'

'He seemed to be up to his elbows in it,' Vinnie said.

She frowned at that. 'I don't know how many mooseburgers those men are gonna take home,' she said. 'They didn't seem too happy.'

'Who are we talking about?' Vinnie said. 'You see, we're sort of trying to track down my brother. We know he came up here.'

'I think I hear them now,' she said. 'Hank took them over to Calstock when they got back from the lake. You know how it is. Seven days in the woods and you need pizza.'

Vinnie went to the window and craned his neck, trying to see who

was outside. 'I don't see him,' he said. 'Which party is this, ma'am?'

Before she could answer, a man came stomping into the office. 'Son of a freaking—Helen, do you have the sheet for these clowns, eh? The sooner we can get rid of them—' He stopped when he saw us standing there. 'Let me guess,' he said. 'The truck that some idiot ran off the road back there.'

'That would be me,' I said. 'There was a moose.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I've got the bill all made up,' Helen said, ruffling through the papers on the desk. 'Let me just put one more thing on here. Gentlemen, this is Hank Gannon. Hank, this is Tom and Alex.'

He stood there looking at us. He was a tall man, with a firm jaw line and a commanding air. His name fitted him perfectly. With the leather coat and wide-brimmed hat, he looked like the Canadian version of a Texas Ranger. 'You boys need something here? Aside from a tow out of the mud?'

'I'm looking for my brother,' Vinnie said. 'He was with the Albright party.'

Helen stopped writing and looked up at us.

'Christ,' Gannon said. 'You guys are looking for Albright, too?'

'Was there somebody else looking for him?'

'Yeah, two other guys, just yesterday.'

'Did they say who they were?'

'Nah, they just wanted to know where Albright was. I told them the same thing I'll tell you. The Albright party came and left.'

'Albright and his men were here, then?' I said. 'Last week?'

'That's right. I flew them back down on Saturday morning. They were gone by noon. Biggest bunch of jackasses I've ever had the misfortune of meeting. Even worse than these guys out here. I swear, Helen, it's just not worth it any more.'

She finished up her bill and gave it to him. 'Here, send them on their way,' she said. 'So we can have some peace.'

'These men who were here looking for Albright,' I said, a sudden thought hitting me. 'Did one of them have a big nose?'

'Yeah,' Gannon said. 'He had a real smart mouth, too.'

'Sir,' Vinnie said. 'Please. What can you tell me about Albright and the men he was with?'

'Ain't much more to tell,' he said. 'We flew them out to Lake Agawaatese and then we flew them back out a week later.'

'Right here,' Helen said, pointing to a map on the wall above the desk. 'See, we've got seven different lakes. Agawaatese is up here.'

She stretched to put her finger on the upper-right corner. 'Good lake for moose, although the cabin could use a little work.'

'There were six men, right?' Vinnie asked.

'No, five,' Gannon said. 'Albright and his partners. What did he call them? His "executive partners". I was expecting a bunch of hot-shots with cellphones and hundred-dollar loafers. But when they got here, eh? They were just thugs.'

'They weren't all partners,' Vinnie said. 'My brother was with them.'

He shook his head. 'The man said they were all partners.'

'My brother was the guide.'

He looked back and forth between us. 'Let's get a couple of things straight here,' he said. 'Number one, if those men were gonna use a guide, they'd use *our* guide. We got an Indian fellow out there who knows these lakes inside and out. Number two, Albright made it crystal clear that he was bringing up four men who worked with him. And that they wouldn't be needing a guide. I tried to talk him out of it, but he dug in his heels. No guide necessary. He said they were all experienced hunters and they didn't need our help. So I said, "Suit yourself, sir. If you don't want to actually find any moose, you go right ahead up there by yourselves." And that's what they did.'

'Which kind of explains why they didn't bring any moose back with them,' Helen said. 'Not that they'd listen to that.'

'You got that right,' he said. 'They came back dirty and tired, and pissed off at everything. Helen wasn't here. She'd gone into Timmins that day. And I told them, I said, you didn't even see the back end of a moose the whole time you were up there, eh?'

'No matter what they said,' Vinnie said, 'my brother did not work for Albright. I mean, just for the few days maybe. That's what he might have meant.'

'I told you,' he said. 'We got this Indian fellow—'

'I know, you've got your own Indian. I'm telling you, Albright was just trying to get round your little rule, OK? He brought his own Indian with him. My brother.'

The man looked at Vinnie, like he was really seeing him for the first time. It was something I'd witnessed before. Some people look at Vinnie and see an Indian right away, like those idiots in the bar in Wawa. Others don't see the Indian in him until he points it out.

'He did look like you,' Gannon said. 'Goddamn.'

'He never came back home,' I said. 'That's why we're here.'

Gannon looked at Helen and then shook his head. 'I'm sorry, I don't know anything about that. I flew them back out and they left.

And fast. Lord knows they had nothing to load except the gear they were carrying in their big black Chevy Suburban. Looked brand-new. Like I said, they were out of here by noon. Plenty of time to get back to Michigan the same day.'

'My brother never came home.'

Gannon threw up his hands. 'I don't know what to say. Although, come to think of it—'

'What?'

'Well, on their way out, I remember this Albright clown saying something about how they didn't get their moose, and they were in no hurry to get back home. So maybe they'd go and have some fun somewhere else.'

'Like where?'

'I was just assuming he meant they'd hit some casinos or some clubs or something. I didn't think much of it at the time.'

'Do you have a phone number for him?' I said. 'Or an address?'

'He paid with a Visa number,' Helen said. 'I'm not sure he ever gave me an address.'

'You've got to have his address,' I said. 'That's just normal business practice, isn't it?'

She looked at me, and then at Gannon. 'I'm not sure we even qualify as a business right now. We're finished here. We're moving out.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't mean to criticise. We're just trying to find out what happened to Tom—' I caught myself. 'Uh, Tom's brother.' Real smooth, Alex.

She shook her head and looked through another pile of papers. Finally, she came up with a card. 'Here's his phone number.' She read off the same cellphone number Vinnie already had.

Vinnie ran one hand through his hair. 'What do we do now, Alex?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Let me think.'

Gannon stood there watching us. Helen was staring at the floor. It seemed ridiculous that we'd drive all the way up here and then leave so quickly.

'We'd appreciate any other help you can give us,' I said to them. 'Do you have any idea where they might have gone?'

'Well,' Gannon said. 'I know what their first stop was gonna be. They ran out of beer their last night on the lake.'

'They were all drinking beer?' Vinnie said.

'Sure seemed to be. All five of them arrived pretty well lubricated.'

'Are you positive they were *all* drinking?' From the sound of his voice, Vinnie was already resigned to it.

'I know how many cases of beer we flew in with, and how many empties we brought back.'

Vinnie seemed to run out of steam right about then. There didn't seem to be much left to say, so I thanked them for their time, and asked the man if he could help get my truck back on the road.

'You go on outside,' he said. 'I'll take care of these guys and then we'll go pull you out of the mud.'

Vinnie didn't say a word as we went back down the rickety front steps and walked by the other hunting party. They were all standing around the butcher's shed, these filthy, unshaven men.

Four days ago, another group of men came back looking the same way and then disappeared off the face of the earth.

Or at least Tom did.

Then two other men came up here looking for Albright.

As Vinnie and I walked up to the vehicles, I turned to look back at the lake. I saw a man standing on the dock, a man I hadn't seen before. He was young, and had the kind of dark features that left no doubt in your mind. He was an Indian.

'That must be the guide,' I said to Vinnie.

He turned, and squinted in the last light of the day reflected off the water. 'Where?'

'Right there,' I said. But as I looked again, the dock was empty.

THREE

The sun was going down when we left. It was a short ride in Gannon's Jeep. We got to my truck and Gannon backed up to it, looped a chain round my trailer hitch and had me out with one pull. It was obviously something he'd done before.

I thanked him. He left. We got in the truck and got the hell out of there. Vinnie didn't say anything. He kept working his hands together into fists, then letting go.

'What do you want to do?' I said. Unless he had some other idea, I assumed I'd just be heading home.

'I don't know.'

'Who do you think those other men were?' I said. 'The ones looking for Albright.'

'Somebody else who was expecting them home a few days ago?'

'That had to be them at the bar in Wawa,' I said. 'The guys who broke that joker's nose.'

'We're on the same trail,' Vinnie said. 'Anybody coming up here pretty much has to stop in Wawa. It's not such a coincidence.'

'We'll keep trying Albright's number,' I said. 'When we get home, maybe we can find out his address.'

He shook his head. 'I can't believe Tom was drinking.'

'You don't know that for sure.'

'Of course he was. Those men were in that cabin for what, seven days? With how many cases of beer?' He shook his head again. 'If he's drinking again, all bets are off, Alex. There's no reason for us to even be up here looking for him.'

'Come on, Vinnie. He's been off the stuff for how long? Six months? Maybe he's gonna fall down a few times at first.'

'I sent him into the woods with a bunch of beer-drinking white men and a stack of bottles. That's what I did for him.'

I didn't say anything. The headlights hit the sign for 631. I took the right turn, heading south.

'I can't go home,' he said.

'Why? You think your family is gonna hold you responsible?'

'Look at everything I did leading up to this,' he said. 'Letting him pretend to be me, violating his parole, sending him up here—'

'OK, it doesn't look good on paper,' I said. 'I'll grant you that.'

Vinnie rubbed the back of his neck. 'Don't you want to know why I let Tom come up here?'

'You told me,' I said. 'You thought you were helping him. You thought he could use the money.'

'No, that's not why.'

'So tell me.'

He settled back in his seat, looked out into the darkening night. 'About a month ago,' he said, 'I was coming home from the casino. It was like ten o'clock at night. I stopped by my mother's house, but it didn't look like anybody was home. I mean, the cars were all gone. The place was dark. I'm about to back out of the driveway, and I notice that the porch light isn't on. Which is the first weird thing. The second weird thing is that there's a light on in the house. Believe me, when my mother leaves the house, she turns every light off, except the one on the porch. And God help you if you mess that up.'

'I believe it.'

'I went inside and called out, you know, "Hey, anybody home?" Nobody answered. But then I thought I heard a noise in one of the

back rooms. It was dark, and hell, it had been a long day, so maybe my imagination got the best of me. I was thinking maybe it was a burglar back there, so I grabbed a fireplace poker, just like in the movies. I go down the hallway real slow, holding that poker, listening. And then I see there's a light on in the bathroom.'

He stopped for a moment, took a deep breath.

'So I called out again,' he went on. '"Hey, who's there?" Nobody answered. So I went up to the door and I opened it.'

He stopped again. There was nothing but the sound of the tyres on the road, and the cold air whistling by.

'Who was it?' I said.

'It was Tom. He had stayed home. You wanna know why?'

I didn't even try to answer.

'He stayed home so he could hang himself in the shower.'

I kept driving. I waited for him to start talking again.

'His face was blue, Alex,' he finally said. 'A minute later and he would have been dead. I grabbed him and tried to lift him in the air. And he started fighting me, kicking me all over. It was just . . . I was so mad, Alex. It's almost funny looking back on it. I wasn't mad that he was trying to kill himself. I was mad that he was doing it in the bathroom. That was my first thought. This is the bathroom that my uncles worked so hard on. Putting in that new bathtub and the shower stall. And they're gonna come home and find your dead stinking body hanging there.'

He rubbed one hand over his face and through his hair.

'If you're gonna kill yourself, you go up to the old graveyard on Mission Hill. You know what I mean? You say hello to your ancestors and then you jump off the cliff. Just walk right out into the sky. That's how you kill yourself.'

'So what happened?' I said.

'Well, at that point I'm fighting him, trying to get him down, and the stupid shower rod breaks. We both go falling in the shower and I just about crack my head open. The extension cord he'd used was coming loose and he's getting his breath back. He's yelling at me and trying to punch me. Then he gives up and just lies there, half in the shower and half out. He starts crying. I sat there with him for, what, maybe thirty minutes, just sitting there watching him cry. I finally asked him, "Why, Tom? Why were you gonna do that?" And he says, "This is the only way out. It's either go back to prison, or this."'

'OK,' I said, after another long silence. 'So how does that end up with you sending him up here?'

'You've got to understand, the only jobs he's ever had aside from leading hunts were either washing dishes or cleaning toilets. He can't even work at the casino, now that he has a record. So I told him just to hold on, you know? Just give me some time to help him. And then when this thing came along. Three thousand dollars for a week of hunting. Only problem was, it was in Canada.'

'Vinnie, I know it's good money, but—'

'It's more than that. Don't you get it? It sounds kinda stupid, but going out on a hunt makes you remember who you are. I mean, most of the time, you're just sitting around or going to work, whatever. Then you go out in the woods with a bunch of white guys and all of a sudden they're treating you like you're fucking Geronimo. Like you're this amazing, wild Indian shaman who can hear messages in the wind and talk to the animals and learn their secrets. And you realise, shit, they're right. I *am* different. My ancestors, they *did* know all this stuff. And I'm still a part of it. You know what I mean?'

'Yeah, I get it. So you decided—'

'He needed this, Alex. He really needed this. Otherwise—'

I shook my head.

'It was either that or let him kill himself,' Vinnie said. 'That was my choice. If I hadn't let him go, he'd be dead. No doubt about it.'

I slowed down to let a string of deer run across the empty road. Five of them, white tails flashing in the headlights. I waited another few seconds. There's always one more.

Then it came. The sixth deer, smaller than the rest. It jumped into the brush, following its family.

We drove on. Another couple of hours passed as we made our way down to White River.

'You know what we should be doing?' I finally said.

'What's that?'

'Well, if Albright and those guys came this way on their way up, and then again on their way down, somebody must have seen them.'

'I suppose so,' Vinnie said. 'How many places could they stop?'

'We're about to hit one of them,' I said. 'Here comes White River.'

The road ended at Route 17. That plus the railroad going through was excuse enough to put a town there. White River had three places where you could get something to eat and drink.

'If you were a rich guy passing through,' Vinnie said, 'which one would you stop at?'

'They all look about the same to me,' I said. I stopped at the first establishment, a little cinder-block bar and restaurant called the

T-Spot. It was a real mom-and-pop operation, with card tables spread out all over the place and a tiny bar. We ordered a couple of cheeseburgers from a lady who looked like she owned the place.

'We got a question for you,' I said. 'Eleven days ago, six men came through here on their way to a hunting trip.'

'Five men,' Vinnie said.

'Yeah, maybe five. They would have come back through again four days ago.'

'Well, let's see. Men on their way to hunt. In October. Hey, Earl!' she called behind her. 'Have we seen any men on hunting trips the past few days?'

'I haven't been counting them,' he said, without even looking up. 'I'd guess around a thousand.'

'These guys were a little different,' I said. 'They were probably dressed a lot better than most of the hunters you get in here. And it sounds like they weren't exactly behaving themselves. At least, all but one of them.'

'What did the other one look like?' she said.

'Like me,' Vinnie said. 'He's my brother.'

The woman studied his face. 'Rich white guys and one Indian?'

'Yes.'

'I remember them. They stopped in for breakfast. Bunch of slick guys. Four whites and one Indian.'

'Breakfast?' I said. 'That must have been on their way up, eleven days ago?'

'Yeah, that sounds about right. They seemed like real pains in the ass, you know, sending the eggs back because they weren't done right. Making a racket. But then they left me a twenty-dollar tip on a thirty-dollar bill. A twenty-dollar tip I'll remember.'

'You didn't see them again when they were on their way back?'

'Nope, just the one time.'

'How about another two men?' I said. 'One with a big nose. They might have come through here yesterday.'

'We got a lot of big noses up here, hon.'

'OK, never mind.' I thanked the woman, we had our dinner, and then we left.

'We're about three hours away from the lodge,' I said. 'So maybe they didn't need to stop yet.'

We checked the other two bars in town. Nothing.

'So maybe they stopped in Wawa?'

'Let's see,' he said.

So we did. We drove another hour and a half. My eyes were getting tired. It was 10.30 when we hit Wawa again.

'We know what our favourite bar in Wawa is,' I said. 'You figure these guys found the same place?'

'Might as well start there,' he said. 'Just promise me you won't get into trouble again.'

The parking lot actually had a few vehicles in it this time, and when we stepped into the place, it almost looked busy. There were two guys playing pool, the chalk dust hanging in the air below the single fluorescent light. Thankfully, our friends weren't trying to play the bowling game.

The same big man was behind the bar. He was working a lot harder now, trying to keep everyone happy, with apparently nobody to help him. He did a double take when he saw us leaning on one end of the bar. 'You guys again,' he said, his voice a hell of a lot less cordial than the first time we heard it. 'Just what I need.'

'We just want to ask you a couple of questions,' I said.

'Can't you see I'm busy here? You want a drink or not?'

'A Molson and a 7-Up,' I said. 'Our usual.'

He didn't smile. He hit the draft handle, drew me a glass that was at least half foam, squirted some soda into a glass and put it down next to the beer. 'Five bucks,' he said.

'Your prices went up,' I said.

'It's a tough business.'

'Whatever your problem is—'

'My problem is as soon as you guys left here today, Stan and Brian got in a big fight. Brian's in the hospital.'

I almost laughed. 'What the hell does that have to do with us?'

Vinnie leaned in front of me. 'We're just looking for somebody,' he said, raising his voice. 'Do you think you could help us out?'

'Who you looking for?'

'My brother.'

'Go check the parking lot. That's about as far as an Indian gets before he passes out.'

The look Vinnie gave him right about then should have scared him. But the bartender didn't know that Vinnie's seven-mile-long fuse was about to burn all the way down.

That's when our friend Stan showed up. There was fresh white tape on his face, and his two black eyes looked even worse. 'Lookee here,' he said. 'It's the Lone Ranger and Tonto again.'

It took Vinnie about two seconds to hit him twice in the face and

then pull his Maple Leafs jersey right over his head. Somebody else jumped in, and then me. Usually I'm smart enough to cover myself in a bar fight, but somehow it all boiled over at that exact moment, all the driving and the dead ends, and everything Vinnie had told me about Tom. Somehow I was plugged into the same anger now, for Tom and for the men he had come up here with, and for everyone else in this goddamn backwoods bar. Fortunately, nobody else in the place seemed too interested in fighting. Most of them just watched us for a minute or two until they could step in and separate us.

'Easy now,' a man said in my ear as he wrapped me from behind in a bear hug. 'Just take it easy.'

Where all this anger had come from, I didn't know. I was thinking about it thirty minutes later, as two officers from the Ontario Provincial Police station down the street had us sitting at a table in the corner. They weren't happy about Vinnie not having a driver's licence, but they ran mine and stood around for a while, figuring out what to do with us. It wasn't the first bar fight they'd seen that week—hell, maybe not even that night—so they let us go with the standard warning.

I was still thinking about it at midnight as we checked in at the local motel. I sure didn't feel like driving another four hours to make it home. Spending the night in Wawa wasn't my idea of a vacation, but at least it wasn't the local jail.

I got Vinnie some ice for the scrape over his left eye, used the toothbrush the man at the front desk had given me, washed it down with tap water that tasted like pure iron.

'These guys didn't just vanish into thin air,' I said later, when the lights were out and I was staring up at the ceiling. 'Where in hell did they go?'

Vinnie lay on the bed across from me. 'I wish I knew, Alex.'

'And these two guys looking for them. Who are they?'

He didn't answer. He stared up at the same ceiling. We both listened to the night and waited for the morning.

THE CHIRPING WOKE ME UP. Some kind of bird was making a racket, and it was doing it about three hours too early. I opened one eye and saw a dim ray of light coming through the window—whose window I could not say. I had no idea where the hell I was.

I sat up. There was a dull ache in my right hand. The bird started chirping again. What in hell, I thought. And then it came back to me. I was in a motel room—in Wawa, Ontario, of all places. The

ache in my hand told me that I had got at least one good shot in before the fight was broken up. And that chirping had to be—

My cellphone rang again. Where the hell was it? The ring was muffled, and it seemed to come from Vinnie himself. I rolled him over and picked it up off the bed.

'Hello,' I said. I looked at the clock. It was 6.32.

'Mr McKnight?' It was a woman's voice.

'Yes.'

'This is Constable Natalie Reynaud of the Ontario Provincial Police.'

I thought of two things at once. One was that the previous night was coming back to haunt us and somebody must have filed charges. The other was how little this woman sounded like a police officer. Most of the women officers I had known had voices like drill sergeants.

'Constable—' I said. That's all I got out.

'You left a message on Mr Red Albright's cellphone,' she said. 'That's how we got this number.'

I ran my hand through my hair. 'Albright's phone? That was actually my friend calling.'

'Mr Albright's wife called the Michigan State Police yesterday. I assume they've been in contact with you already?'

'The police?' I needed to wake up, and fast. I stood up and gave Vinnie a nudge. 'No,' I said. 'We haven't made it back to Michigan yet. We're in Wawa.'

'You were up at Lake Peetwaniquot yesterday,' she said. 'We just spoke to Mr Gannon and Mrs St Jean at the lodge. They told us you were up there.'

'Yes, we drove up to see if we could find Albright and the men who were with him. They were due back a few days ago. Are you telling me that Albright never got home, either?'

'None of the men did. Mrs Albright and the other wives apparently decided to give them one more night, and then call the police. It's been five days at this point. It doesn't take that long to get back down to Detroit.'

'Even less to Sault Ste Marie.'

'Now, that's where we're getting a little mixed up. You see, I've got four names here, Mr McKnight. These were the names called in from Detroit. I don't see anybody from Sault Ste Marie.'

'They picked up another man on the way,' I said. 'That's the man we were worried about.'

'OK, it's starting to make sense now. That's what Mrs St Jean seemed to be saying. There were five men on the hunt.'

'Yes, exactly.'

'Can I get this man's name, please?'

'LeBlanc.'

'LeBlanc,' she said. I could tell she was writing it down. 'What's the first name?'

I looked over at Vinnie. He was out of it.

'It's kind of a long story.'

'If you're telling me I've got a fifth man missing, who the families in Detroit didn't know about, I'm going to need that name right now.'

'You think we could come and talk to you in person, Constable?'

She hesitated. 'Mr McKnight, if you want to come up here, you can do that. But first I want that name.'

'Thomas LeBlanc,' I said.

'That was the fifth man on the hunting trip?'

'Yes. I'm here with his brother, Vincent LeBlanc.'

'OK,' she said. 'See, that wasn't so hard.'

I let that one go. As soon as she ran the name, she'd find out just how hard it really was.

'Listen,' she said, 'we're on our way over to the lodge right now, Mr McKnight. Why don't you come back up and talk to us?'

'I think that would be a good idea.'

'OK. We'll see you there.'

I switched the phone off. Vinnie slept in perfect peace, oblivious to what I'd just done. 'Wake up,' I said.

He lifted his head. His left eye was still swollen. 'What?'

'Albright never got home. His wife called the police in Detroit.'

He pulled himself up until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. 'Man,' he said. 'My head hurts.'

'That was the OPP,' I said. 'They're going to the lodge. I told them we'd meet them there.'

'OK.'

'They wanted Tom's name. I figured it was time to come clean.'

He looked at me. 'You figured that, huh?'

'We're going up to see the police, Vinnie. These men are officially missing now.'

He let out a long breath. Then he pushed himself up and for one second I thought he was going to jump on me. But instead he stumbled towards the bathroom. 'I need to take a shower,' he said. 'I can't go see the police looking like a vagrant.'

An hour later we were both as cleaned up as we were going to get. We stopped in at a little coffee shop down the street, then at the gas

station, and then we were on our way up north. The rest of the morning we spent retracing our route from the day before, through miles and miles of lakes and trees.

It was eleven o'clock when we hit the Trans-Canada Highway again. I knew to take the left, and to look for the unmarked road on the right. I kept the truck out of the mud this time.

When we came round the last bend in the road, we saw the police car parked behind the other vehicles.

'They must be inside,' I said as I parked the truck. The place looked just as deserted as the first time we had seen it. There was a wet wind coming in off the lake again. The air felt heavy and cold.

'The plane's gone,' Vinnie said as we walked towards the lodge. I looked back at the dock. There were just the two aluminium boats, bobbing up and down in the waves.

We went up the creaky old steps and into the lodge. The big moose-head looked down at us. 'Hello!' I said.

Nothing.

'That's what I love about this place,' I said. 'They always know how to make you feel welcome.'

We looked in at the little office, but it was empty.

'Where is everybody?' Vinnie said. 'They told us to meet them here, didn't they?'

'They did,' I said.

We went back to the front door. It opened just as we got there. Helen St Jean took one look at us and screamed.

'Oh, my goodness,' she said. 'You scared the life out of me.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'The police told us to meet them here.'

'The police,' she said. 'Yes. Hank flew them out to the cabin on Lake Agawaatese where the men were staying.'

'How long have they been out there?'

'They flew out around eight. I'm surprised they're not back.'

'Albright's wife called the police,' I said. 'Those men never did get back to Detroit.'

'I know,' she said. 'That's what the constables said.'

We all stood there for a moment. I wasn't sure what else to say. The door creaked open just then and the man from the butcher's shed came in. He stopped when he saw us.

'They're still out there,' Helen said.

The man nodded.

'Ronnie, this is Alex and Tom,' she said. 'They were here yesterday.'

'Yes, we met,' I said.

The man didn't say a word. He gave Helen a little nod and then went back out of the door.

'You'll have to excuse him,' Helen said. 'He doesn't say a lot, especially to strangers. Millie's kinda the same way.'

'It's a good place to live then,' I said. 'Where do you go when you're not up here?'

'We all live in Sudbury,' she said. 'For the last fifteen years, we've been coming up here for summer and fall. Business was good the first few years, then it started to taper off. This year was the worst, and now this . . .' She looked out of the window. 'You fellas want some coffee?' she asked.

'That would be nice,' Vinnie said.

As she left the room, Vinnie went to the window and stared out. 'I wish we were out there,' he said.

'What do you think we'd find?' I said. 'The men have been gone for five days now.'

'People always leave things behind,' he said.

Helen came back out with a pot of coffee and three empty mugs. She poured it black and didn't ask if we wanted cream or sugar. We all stood there looking out of the window for a few minutes, until finally we heard the distant whine of the motor.

'That'll be them,' she said. 'I'd know that sound anywhere.'

We followed her outside. She went down to the dock and stood watching the northern sky. A speck appeared above the trees. It got larger as the sound of the motor grew louder. The plane cleared the tree line then hit the water, touching down as smoothly as a loon returning to its nest. I could see Hank Gannon's face through the windshield as the plane cruised towards the dock.

He cut the motor. Helen stepped up and caught the plane with one hand, then looped two ropes round the cleats on the float, front and back. The door popped open, a small ladder came out and Hank climbed down to the dock.

'Isn't this cosy?' he said, looking right at me. I was still holding my mug. 'Did you bake them a cake, too?'

'The police told them to come back up,' she said.

'Sounds like they've got some real good questions to ask them, too.'

A woman stepped out next. This had to be Constable Natalie Reynaud, wearing the distinctive blue uniform of the Ontario Provincial Police. She had dark hair pinned up under her hat, and I would have put her age around thirty-five if I had to guess. She hopped off the last step of the ladder like it was nothing.

The man who followed her took a lot longer to get down that ladder, and he sure as hell didn't jump off the last step. He was wearing the same uniform, but aside from that he was everything his partner wasn't. He looked like he was in decent shape for a man in his sixties, but I knew that was old for a man on active duty.

'Did you find anything?' Helen asked.

'Just a big mess,' the old cop said. 'Those boys don't know how to clean up after themselves.'

'I tried to clean up a bit,' said Hank. 'Sorry we took so long.'

'One of the windows was knocked in,' the older constable said. 'Looks like a black bear did it. Probably smelt the garbage.'

Constable Reynaud came up to me and looked me in the eye. 'You must be Mr McKnight,' she said. 'And this must be Mr LeBlanc.' She had a nice face, and green eyes. But you could tell she was all business. 'This is my partner, Senior Constable Claude DeMers.'

He came over to us and shook my hand. 'Thanks for coming up,' he said. 'I hope you don't mind if we ask you a few questions.' All of a sudden, he didn't look so old any more.

'Yeah,' Gannon said from behind them, 'start by asking them why they didn't give us their real names.'

DeMers turned and gave him a look. 'Hank, let us handle this. I'm sure there's a good explanation.' He turned back to Helen. 'Is there someplace we can have a chat with these gentlemen, Helen?'

'Use the office,' she said.

DeMers looked at Vinnie. For one long moment the only sounds were the wind and the waves. 'My partner tells me your name is Vincent,' he finally said. 'Not Tom.'

'Tom is my brother.'

'Well, Vincent, like we said, we need to ask a few questions. What do you say we start with you?'

'Vinnie,' I said, 'you don't have to say anything right now. I think maybe we should talk to a lawyer first.'

'I'll tell them what they need to know,' Vinnie said. 'I'll tell them the truth.'

The whole thing went downhill from there. We went to the lodge and they took Vinnie into Helen's office for questioning. I sat by myself in the main room, trying not to look up at the moose-head.

An hour passed. It felt like a day. I got up and went to the window, watched Gannon cleaning out his plane. The other man appeared on the dock, the one who had butchered the moose. What was his name? Ron, that was it. He had a broom in his hands and started to

sweep up. The man's wife appeared. Millie. She went to the end of the dock and looked out at the lake. Ron stopped sweeping and went out to stand next to her. He put his arm round her. She put her head on his shoulder.

I heard a noise behind me. Helen came in through the front door. 'Are they still in there talking to your friend?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'm next.'

She stood by the door, looking uncertain. 'I wanted to start packing up the office. Now that I know we're leaving for good, I just can't stand being here another minute. I hate it like a sickness. I think we all feel that way now, all four of us.'

'Where you gonna move to?'

'We're moving back to Sudbury.'

'Do you have family back there?'

'We have each other,' she said. 'We *are* a family.'

'No children?'

'No,' she said. 'We sort of all have that in common.'

I looked outside the window again. Ron was still standing with his wife's head on his shoulder. Her back was shaking now, like she was crying. Ron put his head on her head and pulled her closer.

A thought hit me. 'The Indian you use as a guide,' I said. 'He was here yesterday, too. I saw him on the dock as we were leaving.'

'Guy? No, I doubt it,' she said. 'I think he left as soon as he got back from the hunt. He left without even saying goodbye.'

'I suppose if I was out in the woods for a week, I'd be anxious to get home, too.'

'No, that was a four-day hunt, over on a different lake,' she said.

'Well, either way, I'm sure I saw him.'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Maybe he was still here. He was an odd young man, I have to say. I never figured out what made him tick.'

The office door opened and DeMers stuck his head out. 'We're done with Mr LeBlanc,' he said. 'Now it's your turn, Mr McKnight.'

This will be loads of fun, I thought. I gave Helen a little smile and stepped up to the plate. As Vinnie came out of the office, he looked cool and unruffled, like he'd spent the last hour just having a nice chat. But that was something Vinnie had in his blood, going back a thousand years. I didn't have that. Not one drop.

'Right in here, please, Mr McKnight,' DeMers said. He sat down in Helen's office chair. Constable Reynaud was sitting next to him in another chair. A real chair. I got the rickety folding chair. 'Let's talk about you first,' he said, smoothing out a wrinkle in his trousers.

'Alex McKnight of Paradise, Michigan. Constable Reynaud did some checking up on you. Turns out you were a police officer.'

'Eight years in Detroit,' she said, looking at her notepad. She was another type of cop entirely. The old line about a woman having to be twice as smart as a man to get half the credit was never more true than in a police station. 'More recently,' she said, 'you were granted a private investigator's licence.'

'I'm not practising,' I said. 'That has nothing to do with why we're here. I came up with Vinnie to help him out, because he's my friend.'

And this is what I get for my trouble, I thought. I help out a friend and I end up getting grilled by another hard-ass cop.

'Yes, about that friend,' he said. 'Mr LeBlanc. He told us quite a tale about his brother Tom, and why he felt it necessary to have him misrepresent his identity. Would you care to tell us your version?'

'I know it looks bad,' I said. 'But this business with Tom is really a separate issue, OK?'

'Give me your version,' he said. 'And then we'll talk about how bad it looks, and how it may or may not be related to our situation.'

I took a deep breath and gave them a quick run-down, beginning with Tom's release from prison, continuing through Vinnie's brilliant plan to let his wayward brother use his identification because it was just the thing to get his head on straight, and ending with our attempt to find out what the hell happened up here.

'Thank you,' the senior constable said when I finished. 'That was illuminating. Although I think you may have left out a couple of details, such as where you fit into this whole thing. You must have had some part in it from the beginning.'

'I didn't,' I said. 'If I'd had any idea what they were trying to do, I would have stopped them.'

'Being a former police officer and all.'

'Former police officer or not, I'd have known it was a bad idea.'

'You didn't know anything about it until he went missing, at which point you dropped everything to come up here to look for him?'

'Vinnie's my friend. It was no big deal,' I said. 'We drove up, we asked some questions, we left.'

'And the other two? The men who were here the day before you?'

'We don't know anything about them. Gannon told us they were looking for Albright.'

'Two men come all the way up here looking for Albright, and the very next day, two other men come looking for Tom LeBlanc.'

'They were all due back,' I said. 'They didn't show. It's not so

unusual people would come looking for them. Constable, is there some point to this?'

'You were a cop once,' he said. 'Put yourself in my place. Four men leave Detroit on a hunting trip. Their actual home addresses were all in Grosse Pointe, by the way. Does that tell you anything?'

'It tells me they had some money.'

'Four seriously wealthy, well-connected men go on a hunting trip, and they never make it back home. The wives file missing-person reports. We get contacted to look into this end of things, because this lodge is the last place they were seen. We soon find out there was a fifth man on the team.'

'He was the guide,' I said. 'They picked him up in the Soo.'

'So you say, and yet the good people here at the lodge know nothing about it. As far as they're concerned, he's just another one of this gentleman's business partners.'

'I don't imagine these people would have appreciated it if they'd known that Albright had brought his own guide. He was taking a job away from a Canadian.'

'OK, well, assuming that was the case, don't you think it looks kind of funny when this mysterious fifth man turns out to be a felon on parole who isn't even supposed to be in the country?'

'I already told you, I know it doesn't look good,' I said.

'So we agree,' he said. He leaned forward in his chair. 'Four rich American men, one American felon. All missing. Two men drive all the way up here looking for them, without giving their names. The next day, two more men drive up here. One of them happens to be the man who loaned the felon his identification, and the other is a non-practising private investigator. And neither of them can spend twenty-four hours in our country without getting into trouble.'

'What are you talking about?' I said. I was afraid I already knew.

Constable Reynaud flipped through her pad. 'Big Tony's Lounge in Wawa,' she said. 'Does that ring a bell?'

'That's the name of the place? Big Tony's Lounge?'

'Let me guess,' she said. 'The other guys started it.'

'How did you know?'

DeMers stood up and opened the door. 'What'll it take you, about nine hours to get home?'

'Eight if I break the speed limit.' I stood up and stretched.

'That's not funny, Mr McKnight. I suggest you head directly home at a reasonable speed, and please make a point of not stopping at any bars, OK? We wouldn't want anyone else to drag you into a fight.'

'We'll go right home,' I said. 'Believe me, it'll be my pleasure.'

'As soon as you get there, contact the Michigan State Police in Sault Ste Marie. They'll be waiting to hear from you.'

'I got it.'

He leaned forward again. 'McKnight,' he said. From one second to the next, his voice had lost its edge. 'May I call you Alex?'

I hesitated. 'Yes.'

'Now that I've read you the riot act like I'm supposed to do, may I talk to you like a human being?'

'Yes,' I said. I looked at Reynaud. She kept watching me.

'I understand why you came up here,' he said. 'Your friend did something really stupid and you were just trying to help him out.'

'That's right.'

'But you know why we had to ask you these questions.'

I looked at Reynaud again. Dark green eyes. 'Yes.'

'OK, so now that it's out in the open, you've got to go back home and let us do our job. Right?'

I nodded.

'OK then,' he said. 'Let's get you on your way.'

He opened the door and led me back into the front room. Vinnie was standing alone at the front window, looking out at the dock, just as I had been. 'That was quick,' he said.

'Alex is an old cop himself,' DeMers said. 'He knows the drill.'

I followed Vinnie onto the front porch. DeMers was right behind me, until Reynaud took him by the arm. They had their little conference while Vinnie and I went down the steps. Hank Gannon was waiting for us, his arms folded across his chest.

'I'm surprised you're not wearing handcuffs,' he said.

'Gannon, we've already had enough for one day,' I said. 'Step aside.'

'Did you explain to the constables why you lied to us?'

'Yeah, we explained it. Now get out of the way.'

'You feel like explaining it to me?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't.'

He shifted his eyes to Vinnie. 'How about you?'

Vinnie ignored that. 'Where's Helen?' he said.

'She went for a walk. She couldn't stand being around here.'

'I owe her an apology,' Vinnie said. 'Please give it to her for me.'

He shook his head. 'This was just what we needed for a send-off—a bunch of drunken assholes from Detroit and a drunken Indian who didn't even know his own name.'

The constables came out of the door. A few seconds later and

Vinnie might have found the end of his fuse again.

'Let them go, Hank,' DeMers said. 'They've got to get home.'

Gannon looked up at them, then at Vinnie, and then at me. After a long moment he stepped back. We walked up to the truck. Ron came out of his butcher's shed and stopped dead in his tracks. He didn't have to say anything to us. The look on his face was enough.

We got in the truck and I fired it up. Only then did Millie come out of the shed. She walked up towards us, moving quickly, like she wanted to tell us something. Ron caught her from behind and led her away, casting one last look over his shoulder at us, like even this sudden impulse on his wife's part was somehow our fault.

'Let's get away from this freak show,' I said.

I got us down the twisty damned service road without incident. When I hit the highway I took the left and headed back to 631. It appeared a few minutes later. I put on my right-turn signal.

I turned. Then I stopped.

'What's wrong?' Vinnie said.

'Is there a reservation around here?'

He nodded. 'Let me think . . . There's one on Constance Lake, just north of Calstock. That's probably the closest. They call them reserves up here, by the way.'

I swung the truck into a U-turn and went back to the highway.

'So why are we going to the reserve when we're supposed to be going home?'

'There was a young Indian at the lodge yesterday. Maybe he knows something the other folks couldn't tell us.'

'I suppose we could try,' he said. 'We could ask around.'

'Helen told me his name is Guy,' I said. 'He was out on a hunt with that other group of men we saw yesterday.'

'So?'

'It was a four-day hunt,' I said. 'That means he flew out on Saturday.'

'The same day Albright's party flew back.'

'Right. Their hunt was on a different lake, but they all take off from the same place. So he might have talked to them. Hell, maybe he did a little Indian bonding with your brother.'

I headed due east on the empty highway towards Calstock.

'He had long hair,' Vinnie said. 'He was maybe eighteen, nineteen years old. He was wearing jeans and a blue and white jacket. I think it had the Toronto Blue Jays emblem on it.'

I looked over at him. 'You saw him.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I saw him.'

FOUR

We hit Calstock just after noon. The highway was bound on both sides by the thick walls of white pine trees, then a sawmill came into view, along with a power plant that obviously burned all the bark and wood waste. The hot smell hung in the air.

Constance Lake appeared on our left just as we entered the reserve. A big wooden sign let us know we were on Indian land.

'Are these Ojibwa up here?' I said.

'No, they're Cree.'

'You guys get along?'

'The Cree and the Ojibwa are like family,' he said. 'It's been that way for hundreds of years. Now more than ever.'

We passed a little shop that sold Indian crafts. Soon after that we were in the heart of the reserve.

'How do we find Guy?' I said.

'There has to be a tribal centre. Keep going.'

We drove by some houses. Eventually we saw a school and beside that a big concrete building that had to be something official. We pulled up and I followed Vinnie inside. The door opened onto a large meeting room, with a great round table in the middle. A young woman was vacuuming the floor. We stood there for a few seconds until she noticed us.

'*Pardonnez-moi*,' she said. She had an unmistakably Indian face, with dark eyes and dark hair tied in a ponytail. She wore thick boots under her long skirt.

'We're sorry to bother you,' Vinnie said. 'We're looking for a young man named Guy. He works at the lodge on Lake Peetwaniquot.'

'Guy Berard. I haven't seen him around in a few days.'

'Can you tell me where he lives?'

The woman looked at Vinnie, then at me. 'Who are you?'

'My name is Vinnie LeBlanc. I'm a Bay Mills Ojibwa, from Michigan. This is my friend Alex.'

'Guy lives in his mother's house,' she said. 'Go south, take the first right. It's the last house on the left.'

'Thank you,' Vinnie said. 'I appreciate it.'

'Is Guy in trouble?'

'No,' he said. 'But my brother is. I'm hoping Guy can help me.'

She nodded. 'Tell Mrs Berard that Maureen sent you.'

'Thank you, Maureen.'

I added my own thanks, and we left. We went back down the road, past the school, and took the right turn. The road ended abruptly. Beyond it some tyre tracks led down to Constance Lake. The water stretched out at least a mile, with low hills in the distance.

There were no other cars in front of the house. It was a small wooden affair the same size as its neighbours, and it had been bright yellow a few seasons ago. Now it needed paint.

Vinnie knocked on the door. We waited. A cold wind picked up and hit us like it was trying to blow us off the little porch. Vinnie knocked again. A woman opened the door.

'We're sorry to bother you,' Vinnie said. 'Is Guy at home?'

The woman looked at Vinnie. Her hair was long and dark, like the hair of the woman at the tribal centre, but it was untied and cascaded over her shoulders. She looked a little too young to be Guy's mother.

'He's not here,' she said. 'Who are you?'

'My name is Vinnie,' he said. 'I'm from the Bay Mills Reservation in Michigan. This is my friend Alex.'

She looked over at me without smiling.

'Maureen sent us,' I said.

She looked back at Vinnie. 'Please come in,' she said, stepping back to let us into the house.

There was a small living room, with barely enough space for a couch and a chair. The curtains were closed and a television cast a pale blue glow over the room.

'Can I get you something?' she asked.

'No, thank you,' Vinnie said.

'Then please sit down.'

She turned off the television and sat down on the chair. Vinnie and I sat on the couch.

'Your son,' Vinnie said. He apparently had no trouble believing this was his mother. 'He works at the lodge on Lake Peetwaniquot.'

'Sometimes,' she said. 'When they need a guide.'

'Do you know if he was out at the lodge yesterday?' I said.

'He was gone yesterday,' she said. 'But I don't know where.'

Vinnie had told me about this business of not interfering in other people's lives, even your own son's. It always seemed a little contradictory to me, how the Indian culture was so centred on family, and yet they believed that you chose your own path in this life, and that nobody should try to change it.

'Can we leave a message for him?' Vinnie said. 'A number he can call when he comes home?'

'You can do that,' she said.

I had a pen in my coat pocket. I took it out and gave it to Vinnie, along with the receipt from the gas station. He wrote my cellphone number on the back.

'My brother is missing,' Vinnie said as he gave it to her. 'He was last seen at the lodge. I was hoping maybe your son might have some kind of information to help us find him. That's all.'

There was a noise in the room behind us. It sounded like something bumping into the wall.

'That's Guy's grandfather,' she said. 'I thought he was asleep.' She stood up. It was our cue to do the same.

'Please have Guy give us a call,' I said. 'We'd really appreciate it.'

As she showed us out, I couldn't help noticing the coats hanging on hooks beside the door. One of them was a blue and white jacket, with the Toronto Blue Jays emblem. I didn't say anything until we were back in the truck.

'Did you notice the jacket?' I asked Vinnie.

'Yes.'

'Did that whole conversation strike you as a little strange?'

'I'm not sure it even qualified as a conversation,' he said. 'But yeah, you're right.'

'What do you think? Was she lying?'

'Indians make terrible liars,' he said.

'If I said something like that, you'd hit me in the mouth.'

'It's true,' he said. 'As a general rule.'

We drove by the last of the houses, heading back towards Calstock. The sign told us we were leaving the reserve.

'What do we do now?' I said.

'I don't know. I'd like to find out what's going on with Guy.'

'Maybe he didn't want to talk to a white man.'

Vinnie looked over at me.

'Maybe he saw me through the window,' I said.

'Yeah, you're pretty scary-looking.' He turned away again.

'I'm just saying, this might not mean anything at all. We can look up the number for the tribal centre. If we don't hear from Guy in a couple of days, we can give Maureen a call.'

'Alex, wait . . .'

'Look, we don't have to—'

'Alex, *stop!*'

I slammed on the brakes. 'What is it?'

'Back up,' he said.

It was a good thing we were on one of the loneliest roads in the world. I put the truck in reverse and backed up about fifty yards before he told me to stop again. The wheels were still rolling as he threw his door open and jumped out, heading for the woods.

I pulled the truck off the road and killed the engine. Then I stepped out into the cold air. There was a silence in the trees. All the birds had already left for the winter.

'What's going on, Vinnie?' I shouted.

'Come down here,' he called.

I walked over the gravel shoulder and stepped down to the drainage ditch. Vinnie had already pushed his way through the brush.

'What is it?' I said. 'What do you see?'

As I got closer, I saw for myself. There was a black Chevy Suburban in the thick undergrowth.

Vinnie was standing on the driver's side with his face pressed against the glass. I caught up with him and looked inside. I could make out sleeping-bags and boxes and long, leather rifle cases. Vinnie was breathing hard next to me.

'Do you think this is it?' I said.

He didn't answer.

I pushed past him and tried the driver's side doors. They were locked. Inside, I could see the keys hanging from the ignition. I went round to the other side. These doors were locked, too. I could see an empty beer bottle lying on the front passenger's seat.

I started to feel a dull sense of dread. Why would the vehicle be here, miles off the main road? Unless . . . Before I could finish the thought, I heard the sound of breaking glass. As I looked through the window I could see Vinnie raising the stone in his hand again, and smashing it into the driver's side window.

'Vinnie! What the hell!'

By the time I got back over to the driver's side, the door was open and he had climbed inside.

'Vinnie, you've got to get out of there!' I was already thinking ahead to what the police would think of this when they got here.

He climbed over to the second row of seats. There was a pile of wallets on the floor. He started picking them up one by one. His hand was bleeding.

I looked at the broken glass that had sprayed all over the front seat. I looked back at the road. It was still empty, silent. When I

looked back at Vinnie, he was frozen still, one wallet held tight in both hands. A drop of blood fell from his hand.

'Whose is that?' I asked.

He didn't say anything. He just opened it up and showed me the picture of himself.

A COUPLE OF CONSTABLES showed up within minutes of my call. One had scar tissue laced through both eyebrows. An old boxer, I would have bet money on it. The other guy had never been hit in the face, and he had a deep suntan, even by American standards.

They pulled up behind my truck, radioed in the basics—exact location, licence plate of the vehicle, our names—and then stood there for a moment, looking at us. The cop with the suntan took out a first-aid box and wrapped up Vinnie's right hand, while Boxer Face took a few steps down into the ditch. He came back up and stopped right in front of me.

'Did you break the window, sir?'

'That was me,' Vinnie said. The man turned and looked at him, then addressed me again.

'As of this morning, we've been trying to locate five men who didn't make it back to America after a hunting trip.'

'I know,' I said. 'We spoke to two other constables this morning.'

'So how did you end up finding this vehicle?'

'We got lucky. We were driving by and we saw it.'

'And the reason you broke into it?'

'I told you,' Vinnie said. 'I did that.'

'I heard you the first time,' the cop said. 'Maybe you guys shouldn't say anything else for the moment, eh? I think we need to take you back to the detachment.'

'Are we under arrest?'

'Not at the moment,' he said.

'This man had nothing to do with this,' Vinnie said. 'It was all me.'

'Vinnie, shut up,' I said. 'Just cool it.'

We all stood there while my man went to the car and talked on the radio. Twenty minutes later, constables DeMers and Reynaud arrived. DeMers got out of the car and came over to us, probably moving faster than he had in twenty years. He took a flashlight off his belt and climbed down the drainage ditch to the Suburban. After fighting his way through the brush, he shone the flashlight into the interior. Constable Reynaud stayed up on the road. She looked at me and shook her head slowly.

And this time around she looked even better. It was a hell of a thing to notice under the circumstances, but damn.

As DeMers was fighting his way back, he tripped over something and ended up flat on his face. When he stood up again, both knees were soaking wet. 'Son of a bitch,' he said. When he was finally back on the road, he tried brushing himself off. It didn't do much good.

He came and stood in front of us. 'The window,' he said.

'That was me,' Vinnie said. I wanted to smack him in the face.

'Yeah, I sorta figured that,' he said, eyeing the bandage on Vinnie's hand. 'You wanna tell me why you broke in?'

'I wanted to see if Tom's stuff was in there.'

'And was it?'

'Yes. I mean, it was actually my wallet.'

'Your wallet was in the vehicle?'

'The wallet I let Tom use.'

'Naturally,' DeMers said. 'Because he was supposed to be you.'

'Yes.'

'I trust you left the wallet in there.'

'Yes.'

DeMers nodded his head, then came back to me. 'How about you, Alex? Did you compromise the crime scene, as well?'

'No,' I said.

He was about to say something but stopped. 'I'll take these men,' he finally said to the other cops. 'You guys stay here.'

DeMers opened up the back of his car and motioned us inside. He didn't look me in the eye as I walked by him. He looked down at the ground and it sounded like he was trying to measure his breathing.

As soon as we were set, he flipped the car into gear and turned it round. He drove through Calstock and took a left, pushing eighty-five as he hit the highway. Reynaud frowned as she watched him drive. She looked back at us, catching Vinnie's eye before settling on me.

'Claude, please take it easy,' she said, turning away from me. 'You wanna get in a wreck three months away from retirement?'

'These guys,' he said. 'Goddamn it all.'

'I know,' she said. 'I know. Just take it easy.'

About a half-hour later, we hit a small town. He pulled into a parking lot, next to a long, single-storey building. The sign read ONTARIO PROVINCIAL POLICE, HEARST DETACHMENT.

DeMers opened the car door and let us out. 'This way,' he said. He led us through the front door, past the reception area, down a hallway, into an interview room. Before he could close the door, another

officer stuck his head in, gave us a once-over and called DeMers out into the hallway. Reynaud sat down on the opposite side of the table.

'Is that his superior?' I said.

'The detachment commander, yes. Staff Sergeant Moreland.'

'He doesn't look happy.'

'I don't think he is.'

We lapsed into silence until the door swung open and DeMers came back into the room. His knees were still wet.

'All right,' he said as he sat down. 'Here's where we are. We'll take the vehicle over to the main detachment in Timmins. Of course, we already know a couple of things they're gonna find, don't we?'

He paused and looked at both of us.

'They'll find a lot of shattered glass,' he said. 'Some blood. They'll find the wallets, which might be the most important piece of evidence. But, of course, they'll have a new set of fingerprints on them. That's gonna make their job a hell of a lot harder.'

He stopped again. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. I wondered if anyone was watching us through the two-way mirror.

'Here's the thing,' he said. 'I asked you to go back to Michigan, but you guys headed right over to the Constance Lake Reserve.'

'I saw a young Indian at the lodge,' I said. 'I thought he might know something that could help us. Constance Lake is the nearest reserve, so I figured that's where we'd find him, but he wasn't there.'

'Have you ever been on the reserve before today?'

'No, of course not.'

'And you, Mr LeBlanc? Do you have any connection to anyone on the Constance Lake Reserve?'

'No,' Vinnie said. He sat there with arms folded across his chest.

'So you went to find this young Indian, who Mr McKnight said he saw at the lodge, but he wasn't there. Then you left.'

'Yes.'

'Who spotted the vehicle?'

'I did,' Vinnie said.

'That's pretty amazing. The vehicle was deep in the woods.'

'I happened to be looking out the window,' Vinnie said.

DeMers turned to Constable Reynaud. 'I still think it's amazing,' he said. 'Don't you?'

She thought about it for a moment. 'Yes, it was amazing.'

'I know I wouldn't have spotted that vehicle,' DeMers said. 'But, if I knew to look for it, that would be a different story.'

'What are you suggesting?' I asked.

'That you either had a very good reason to find that vehicle and break into it. Or else you were so lucky you just happened to stumble over it, and so stupid that you'd intentionally compromise a crime scene. Which is it?'

'I don't know about lucky,' I said, 'but we'll cop a plea on stupid.'

Vinnie gave me a quick look. He kept his arms folded.

'Those men left the Lodge five days ago,' DeMers said. 'Instead of going home, they did God knows what and their empty van ends up ditched in the woods, just outside the reserve, which, as you know, is most definitely *not* on the way home. So what do *you* think happened?'

'One of those men is my brother,' Vinnie said. 'Why don't you get out there and look for them instead of asking us stupid questions.'

That was enough for DeMers. He stood up and told us to do the same. Then he led us out of the interview room and deep into the back of the building. There were three empty holding cells there. He showed us into the first of them, slammed the door shut behind us and put his hands on the bars.

'You guys are making this really hard,' he said. 'We're trying to find these men, eh? Why can't you just let us do that? Breaking into the van and messing everything up? You think that helps us? For God's sake. Didn't I tell you to go home?'

I was about to answer him, but he cut me off.

'We're on the same side, eh? Why don't you try cooperating for a change, eh?'

I wasn't sure what to say.

'Just sit tight here for a minute,' he said. 'I'll be right back.' He walked away, shaking his head.

Vinnie was already sitting down on one of the two beds in the cell. I sat down on the other one.

'What the hell is going on?' Vinnie said. 'It's like he's Jekyll and Hyde or something.'

'Son of a bitch,' I said. 'I know what he's doing.'

'He's trying to set us up for something?'

'No,' I said. 'Not at all. That little show in the room, that was for his boss. The guy must have been behind the glass.'

'What are you talking about?'

'DeMers is springing us,' I said. 'Don't you see? He ran us through the wringer because he had to, just on the face of it. But now he's going out of his way to get us out of it.'

'Why would he do that?'

'I don't know, Vinnie. He's been a cop a long time. He must know

we're being straight with him. So he blows off a little steam and then he does the right thing. He's gonna kick us out of here.'

'Whatever you say.'

I sat back on the bed and leaned my head against the hard wall. 'Let me ask you something,' I said. 'When you were looking through those wallets, did you happen to notice if the cash was missing?'

He looked up at me. 'There was no cash or credit cards.'

'You think it's a coincidence Guy's mother was acting so strange?'

'That doesn't make any sense,' he said. 'If he was involved in this, he wouldn't dump that vehicle a mile from the reserve.'

'No, not if he had a choice. Hell, I don't know.'

Vinnie stared at the floor. 'How long are we gonna be here?'

'I'll bet you he comes back in five minutes,' I said.

He was back in four. Reynaud was with him.

'Ready to go?' he said as he opened the cell door.

'You guys don't know how to play this game,' I said. 'This cell feels like a three-star hotel.'

DeMers led us down the hall. 'What are you gonna do as soon as you get outside?' he said.

'Is my truck here?'

'We towed it over, yes.'

'Then I'm gonna get in and drive home.'

'Good man,' he said. 'If you don't, God help me, I'll find you and kick your ass all the way home myself.'

I smiled at that one. Reynaud smiled, too. Just a little bit.

'That's not meant to be funny,' DeMers said. 'I'm doing you a favour here. Don't make me regret it.'

'We're going,' I said. 'And I suppose we owe you some thanks.'

He shook it off. 'Thank me by never letting me see your face again.'

As we walked to the truck we could see that the world had changed in the past hour. It was late in the afternoon and there was snow in the air. The wind was swirling it around in every direction.

I took one last look behind me, fired up the truck and got us the hell out of there. If we made good time, we'd be home by midnight.

'It's too bad you won't see her again,' Vinnie said.

'What do you mean?'

'Constable Reynaud. She's strong and quiet, like a wolf.'

'You're so full of it.'

'Shit, I should call home,' he said, picking up the cellphone and turning it on. 'We might actually have a signal in Hearst.'

'Are there any messages?'

'No. Just seven missed calls. They must have hung up.'

'It's probably your family,' I said.

'Yeah, probably.' Vinnie dialled the number and waited. A few seconds later, he had his mother on the phone. He listened to something she was saying, and didn't seem to like it. 'You didn't have to let them do that, even though they asked.' He rubbed his forehead while he listened some more. Then he hung up.

'What's going on?' I said.

'The Michigan State Police came to the house. They told her about the vehicle, and they asked if they could search Tom's room.'

'Did they find anything?'

'A bag of marijuana.'

'I thought he was clean now.'

'Yeah, well, I guess he was still smoking weed now and then.'

'How's your mother doing now?'

'We've got to get home. She doesn't know what to do with herself.'

'We're going,' I said. I pushed the pedal down. The snow was still swirling around in the air, but it wasn't sticking yet.

'By the way, those calls on your cellphone, they weren't her.'

'No?'

'No. You want me to check? You've got call history, right?'

'Yeah, but you've got to go into the menu and turn that little wheel. Here, let me have it.'

He handed me the phone. Before I could do anything, it rang in my hand. I looked at the display. The call was coming from a 313 number. That meant Detroit. I hit the button and said hello.

'Who is this?' It was a man's voice.

'This is McKnight,' I said. 'Who is this?'

'Somebody left a message on Red's machine,' the man said. 'They left this number.'

'That was my friend,' I said. 'We were trying to find out if Red had got back home yet. Who am I speaking to?'

For a few seconds all I heard was static, until finally the voice broke through again. 'The police said they found Red's van in the woods up there. You wanna tell me what's going on?'

'That's what we're trying to find out,' I said. 'Are you gonna tell me who you are or not?'

'Red is my brother. What's going on up there?'

'You gotta talk to me first,' I said. 'You're one of the men who came up here, aren't you? Are you the guy with the big nose?'

'Friend, you are really pushing your luck. You know that?'

'You were up here, looking for Albright. Where are you now?'

The line was silent for a few seconds. I wasn't sure if I was still connected. Finally, the voice came back on. He spoke slowly, as if he could barely control himself. 'I will find out who you are. And I will break every bone in your body. Are you hearing me?'

Then the signal went out for good. I threw the phone on the seat.

'What was that about?' Vinnie said.

'One of those other men who were up here,' I said. 'Said he was Red's brother. He must have got into Albright's phone messages. You should've heard this guy, Vinnie. This is getting worse by the minute.'

'His brother's missing. I can relate to that. Of course he'll be mad.'

'No, it's more than that. He sounded like the kind of guy who gets mad for a living.'

'You think Tom got hooked up in something?'

'It doesn't look real good right now. You've got to admit it.'

He didn't say anything.

There was no need to push it further, so I settled in for the drive, never looking in the rearview mirror. Up here, you don't need one.

I heard the buzzing noise, then finally looked up and saw the motorcycle closing on us from the rear. My first thought was the phone call. Red's brother had connections in Canada, and this was his way of letting us know he didn't appreciate my attitude.

The motorcycle drew even with me and the rider gestured for me to pull over. He had a black helmet on, so I couldn't see his face. But I recognised the blue and white jacket. I pulled over.

The motorcycle fishtailed as it came to a stop in front of us. The rider got off and walked over. I rolled down my window.

'You always drive that fast?' he said, taking off his helmet. He had long dark hair, dark eyes, and the wide cheekbones of a full-blooded Indian. He looked in past me at Vinnie.

'You must be Guy Berard,' I said.

If he was surprised, it didn't show. 'You're McKnight and LeBlanc. I've been trying to catch up with you ever since you left the police station.'

'How'd you know we were there?'

'I saw you guys on the road,' he said. 'Where that van was. I saw the police take you away.'

'Yeah? And how did you know who we were?'

He gave me a slight smile. 'My mother told me all about you.'

'You were at home, weren't you? How come you hid from us?'

'Can we go talk about this somewhere? I'm freezing my ass off.'

'What do you know about the men on the hunting trip?' Vinnie said. 'If you know something, just tell me now.'

Guy looked past me again. 'You're the brother?'

'Yes,' Vinnie said.

'I'll tell you one thing,' he said. 'And then you can decide if you want to hear the rest. I was there at the lodge on Saturday.'

'We already figured that out,' Vinnie said. 'That's the day Tom's group flew back from the lake. Did you talk to them?'

'No, not that day,' Guy said. 'They were already gone.'

'OK, so what's the big deal?' Vinnie said.

'I don't think that group came back that day at all,' he said.

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying I think they either came back on a different day,' he said. 'Or else they never flew out to that lake in the first place.'

WE FOLLOWED GUY back to the reserve. I got a little anxious driving by the crime scene again. There were five OPP cars parked up and down the road, but nobody stopped us.

Guy parked his motorcycle behind his house and came back round to lead us through the front door. His mother nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw us.

'It's OK,' Guy said. 'I stopped them on the road. I decided I needed to talk to them.'

She nodded her head, but kept staring at us with wide eyes. Guy sat down next to her on the couch and slid over to give Vinnie room. I sat on the chair next to the television.

'So why are you talking to us now? I said. 'Earlier you hid from us.'

'A lot's happened since then,' he said. 'They found that Suburban in the woods, for one thing. Then the police came by looking for me. Just to ask me some questions, they said.' His mother closed her eyes as he said that. 'They must have got my name from the lodge. And with me living here on the reserve, I mean, you can imagine what they were thinking. I know they'll ask me if I had ever met Tom before, or if I had talked to him at the lodge.'

'Did you?' Vinnie said.

'I was there the Saturday they arrived. Mr Gannon had told me they didn't want a guide. So when I saw Tom, I said to myself, no wonder, these jokers brought their own guide. I was a little upset. Then I heard these guys carrying on, and I wasn't upset any more. They were just a bad bunch, you know? The white guys, I mean.' He slipped me a quick look. 'Not Tom. He was cool about it. I was

pretty sure he was at least part Indian, so I went up to him and asked him what the deal was on these guys. He said they were all a little drunk already. I asked him if he was up for spending a whole week with these guys, and he said he'd deal with it.'

'Had Tom been drinking?'

'I don't think so.'

'OK. So what happened then? They loaded up and flew out?'

'I don't know. I left. I wanted to get home and take a shower.'

'So you never actually saw them fly out in the plane?'

'No,' he said. 'I just assumed they did. The next time I was at the lodge was this past Saturday, the day they were supposed to come back. By the time I got there, they were already gone. The plane was back in the dock and their Suburban wasn't there any more.'

'So what makes you think they never flew out there?'

'It's just a bunch of things, you know? When I got to the lodge on Saturday, it was like nobody had been there at all. The butcher's shed was clean, the dock was clean. It was just . . . weird.'

'Gannon said they didn't get a moose,' Vinnie said. 'So of course the shed's gonna be clean.'

'Yeah, that's what he told me. But it was the way he said it. It just gave me a funny feeling. And then when the other group got there, I was busy helping them get their stuff together, while Mr Gannon fired up the Otter, and I can't help noticing he's cranking and cranking that thing until it finally starts. If he had just been out that morning, the engine would have still been warm.'

'Are you gonna tell the police this?' I said.

He raised his hands. 'I'm gonna tell them I've got this funny feeling Mr Gannon never actually flew out on Saturday to pick them up? And that everybody at the lodge is lying to them? How do you think that's gonna go over? They're already thinking maybe me and Tom had something to do with this.'

His mother put her hands to her face. '*Guy, mon coeur*,' she said.

'Don't worry, Mom. It's gonna be OK.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Just from my old days as a cop, I gotta tell ya. The odds of getting four people to all tell you the same lie . . .'

'Did you talk to all four of them?'

'Well, actually, no. Just Helen and Gannon.'

'Let me ask you this,' he said. 'How was Mr Gannon acting?'

I thought about it. 'Like he couldn't wait to get rid of us,' I said.

'OK, then.'

'What do you think, Vinnie?' I said.

'We can't just go back to the lodge and ask them. Is there some other way we can tell if they went out there?'

'Yes,' Guy said. 'As a matter of fact, there is.'

'How?'

'I was out at that cabin three weeks ago. I remember how we left it. I could tell if someone else has been there.'

'Gannon took those two constables out there yesterday,' I said. 'It sounded like it was a real mess.'

'But who knows if those men really made that mess?' Guy said.

'What, you mean somebody else did?'

'If they can lie about them going out to that cabin, they can certainly take a few minutes to make it look like they were there.'

'OK, so how do we get out there? Gannon isn't gonna fly us.'

'He doesn't have to.'

'Who else has a plane?'

Guy smiled. 'I'll show you.'

He led us back outside and down the street to the house next door. A thin stream of smoke rose from a metal chimney pipe, set at a crazy angle in the middle of the roof.

Guy pushed open the front door. 'Grandpère?'

We followed him into the room. The television was on and a fire glowed red through the glass door of the wood stove.

'Grandpère!' Guy said, a little louder.

A man came in through the back door. He was carrying enough firewood in his arms to keep the house warm all night. He dropped it in a heap next to the stove.

'You're back,' he said to Guy. 'What's happening?'

'I want you to meet Alex and Vinnie,' he said. 'Vinnie's brother was one of the men in the hunting party.'

He looked at us carefully. His face was wrinkled, but he had the barrel chest of a circus strong man. His black hair was streaked with grey, and was even longer than his grandson's.

'Some people call me Maskwa,' he said.

'The bear,' Vinnie said.

'Yes, very good.' He shook my hand.

'Pleased to meet you, sir,' I said.

'And you,' he said, shaking Vinnie's hand. 'You're not Cree, are you?'

'No, I come from the Bay Mills Reservation,' he said. 'In Michigan.'

'Grandpère, these men came all the way up here to find out what happened to Vinnie's brother. We've got to help them.'

'Excuse me for saying so,' he said. 'Why do we need to do this?'

'Because something's not right,' Guy said. 'And it might end up hurting all of us. We need to fly out to Lake Agawaatese.'

Maskwa looked at us all, one by one. 'Are you making a joke?'

Guy ran down the quick version of what he had told us, and his suspicions that everyone at the lodge had been lying to us. 'We have to find out if they were really there,' he said.

Maskwa listened carefully, and when it was over he stepped in front of Vinnie and grabbed him by the shoulders. 'What's your real name, young man?'

'Misquogeezhig.'

'That means . . . red sky, right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What's your brother's name?'

'Minoonigeezhig.'

Maskwa hesitated. 'Pleasing sky? Where the sun sets?'

'Yes.'

'Does your heart tell you that your brother's in trouble?'

'Yes, sir.'

Maskwa nodded his head. 'OK. So we'll go to the lake. We'll see if that tells us anything.'

'Do you have a plane?' I said.

He said a couple of words I couldn't understand. Guy laughed, and Vinnie apparently understood enough to laugh too.

'It's too late to fly now,' Maskwa said. 'We'd never make it back before dark. So first thing tomorrow morning.'

I looked at Vinnie. I didn't have to say anything. He knew what this meant.

'You should go home,' he said to me. 'I'll stay and go out there.'

'I'm not leaving you here,' I said.

'DeMers will kill us if he finds out.'

'He can try,' I said. 'I think he's too old to catch us.'

Vinnie smiled. We were both in all the way.

'You'll stay here,' Maskwa said. 'Have you eaten? Come, sit down.'

We had dinner with them, all five of us crowded round Maskwa's little table in the kitchen. After dinner Maskwa fixed us up with sleeping-bags on the floor of his living room. We watched the fire through the glass doors of his stove as the wind blew outside.

'Where do you think they really are?' Vinnie finally said.

'The police have everybody looking for them. They'll find them.'

'Do you think they're alive?'

I didn't have an answer for that one. I didn't even try.

MASKWA WOKE US UP with the sun. Guy was already in the kitchen, filling up a big Styrofoam cooler with ice.

'If we're gonna fly all the way out there,' Maskwa said, 'we'll need some food. Do you want me to throw some beer in there, too?'

'So long as you're not drinking it while you fly,' I said.

He laughed. Then he slung a big bag over his shoulder and told us to follow him. 'It's time to show you my plane,' he said.

He led us out of the back door and down the path to the lake. 'I do hunts myself,' he said as we picked our way down the trail. 'I take them even farther north.'

'Do you have much business?' Vinnie said.

'Less and less. I used to do them with my son, Guy's father. We were a good team.'

'Your son's not around any more? I'm sorry, is he—'

Maskwa waved his hand at that. 'I did a couple with Guy, but he can make a lot more money at the lodge. I don't blame him.' He sneaked a look back at his grandson, bringing up the rear.

We finally came to an old building that looked like a boathouse, but when Maskwa opened the door we saw a plane inside. He told us it was a DHC-2 Beaver, not quite as big as Gannon's Otter, but more than enough plane to get the job done.

When the big lakeside door was open, he hopped up on one of the floats and climbed the ladder into the cockpit. He gave the engine a few cranks until it caught. The noise was downright painful. He came to the door and took the cooler from Guy, then waved Vinnie and me up the ladder. As soon as we were on board, Guy pushed the plane out onto the lake, jumped onto the float and climbed the ladder to join us. He closed the door and sat beside his grandfather.

'Everybody ready?' he said.

I wasn't sure, but I wasn't going to say anything.

Maskwa let the throttle out and pointed the plane towards the far end of the lake. 'Next stop, Lake Agawaatese!' he yelled over the din of the motor.

We were getting closer and closer to the far shoreline. Maskwa pulled the yoke back and the plane fought its way off the water and into the air. We cleared the trees with three inches to spare, then the plane kept climbing into the sky, higher and higher.

For nearly an hour we flew over thick pine forest broken only by lakes and streams. The morning clouds had moved off to the east, but the wind was still blowing. A gust would catch the plane now and then, dropping the bottom out of my stomach. At one point, the plane

took a sudden dip and half the dashboard came loose and landed in Maskwa's lap. Guy reached over and calmly pushed it back in place.

I felt Vinnie tapping me on the shoulder. I looked over and saw an eagle soaring in the sky. 'Migizi,' he said. 'Maybe it's good luck.'

Maskwa banked the plane and started his descent. Through the windshield I could see Lake Agawaatese coming up fast. He brought the plane in just over the trees, with what looked to be about three inches to spare again, and then touched down. We skipped a couple of times until the water finally grabbed us for good.

'A little rough, Grandpère,' Guy said.

'Let's see you do it,' Maskwa said.

'I've watched you enough times, I bet I could.'

Maskwa cut the throttle back and drove the plane through the water. We rounded a bend and there was the cabin on the far shore, a small white building with an L-shaped dock, an aluminium motor-boat tied up to it. As we got closer, I saw another smaller building by the water and a third back in the woods. Maskwa cut the motor and we drifted the rest of the way. Guy climbed out of his door and jumped onto the dock. When the plane was tied down, we followed him. The buzzing of the plane's engine still rang in my ears.

'All right, let's take a look around,' Guy said. He led us into the cabin. There was a small wooden porch and a screen door in front, with two screened windows. One of them was pushed in. 'Goddamn bears,' he said. 'If they smell garbage . . .'

When I stepped into the cabin myself, garbage was exactly what I saw. There was a table in the centre of the room, with enough spilt breakfast cereal and ketchup and God knows what else to draw a dozen bears. The stale smell of beer hung in the air, and the wooden floor was sticky to walk on. There were unwashed plates stacked up on the counter, and three pots on the propane stove.

While the other men stood there looking at the mess, I went into the other room. There were three separate bunks—just bare wood to put your sleeping-bags on—and a wood stove.

'My God, what an unholy pigsty,' Maskwa said.

'It obviously wasn't like this the last time I saw it,' Guy said. 'But you could fake this. If you wanted to make it look like somebody was here, you just come in and trash the place.'

'They could fool the police that way,' Maskwa said. 'But not you.'

Guy nodded. 'First, the propane,' he said. He went outside to the tank beside the cabin. 'When I left here, it was three-quarters full. Now it's . . . Let's see . . .' He checked the gauge. 'About a quarter.'

'Is that how much gas you'd use in a week?' I asked.

'Yeah, pretty much.'

'So maybe they were here,' Maskwa said.

'Unless somebody switched the tanks. Hold on.' He went down to the little shed by the dock and looked inside. He took out two red gasoline cans and shook them one by one. 'Damn, these are empty,' he said. 'How much could they use?'

'They must have gone out in the boat a lot,' Maskwa said.

'Two cans' worth?' Guy shook his head and looked around.

'If there's no way to know for sure—' I started.

'Something's wrong,' Vinnie said. He had been quiet since we had landed here. 'Something is very wrong.'

'How do you mean?'

'Let me ask you something,' he said to Guy. 'If you were leading a hunt here, would you leave this place looking like this?'

'No, of course not. Even if I couldn't stand the men I was with, I'd still clean up before we left,' Guy said.

'Exactly. That's the same thing Tom would have done.'

'So what are you saying?' I said.

'They didn't leave here under normal circumstances,' Vinnie said. 'Something happened. Maybe they had to leave in a hurry.'

'Or maybe'—Maskwa spoke up behind us—'they never left at all.'

Vinnie turned round and looked at him.

'Maybe they got lost hunting,' Maskwa said. 'The people at the lodge, they didn't want to deal with it. So they lied.'

'Tom wouldn't get lost,' Vinnie said.

'He is a long way from home. These are not his woods.'

'If that's what happened,' Vinnie said, looking beyond the cabin at the thick wall of trees, 'then he's still out there. Tom knows how to survive, how to find plants to eat, how to make shelter.'

'But why would their wallets be in the Suburban?'

'They may have left them here at the cabin,' Vinnie said. 'When Gannon came out here, he found them. Maybe Maskwa is right. The people at the lodge are covering up something.'

Maskwa stepped up to Vinnie and grabbed him by the shoulders. 'We will look,' he said. 'I promise you. We can't panic, Vinnie.'

'I know.'

'Let's eat first, OK? Then we'll look.'

Maskwa sent Guy back to the plane for the big bag and the cooler. Then he sat down on the dock and took out two long salamis and a loaf of bread. We all sat down with him and ate. Maskwa passed me

one of the chilled Molsons. The sun came out and shone on the surface of the lake, making it feel a lot warmer than it really was. Under different circumstances, it would have been a hell of a nice day.

'You and Vinnie can go out together,' Maskwa said to Guy as we finished up. 'Alex will come with me.' He looked at his watch. 'We should meet back here at three. The days are getting shorter—any later and we won't have enough daylight to fly back.'

Vinnie and Guy picked the trail that went north from the cabin site. The other trail curled round the rim of the lake before heading west into the woods. Maskwa led the way.

'If they're lost,' I said, 'then they could be miles away from here. How are we gonna find them?'

'We won't,' he said. 'But we may find which way they went.'

I followed him deeper and deeper into the woods. The trail seemed to disappear every now and then, but Maskwa kept moving forwards, and the trail would appear again. 'You see all these tracks,' he said. 'They're black bears. See how they walk? Each back foot almost steps into the front track.'

'Are you seeing any human tracks around here?'

'Of course, aren't you?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm not good at this.'

'You just have to look,' he said. 'Come here.' He went to the edge of the trail and crouched down. I leaned in as he brushed away some pine needles. 'Here's a boot print. What does it tell you?'

'Looks like about a size twelve,' I said.

'What else?'

'I'd guess it's not very recent.'

'Why would you say that?'

'Well, we don't see any tracks in the middle of the trail. It's all bear tracks. That means the bears have been here more recently.'

'OK, what else?'

'The pine needles,' I said. 'It would take some time for the needles to fall and cover the tracks.'

'Couldn't this man have stepped on top of the pine needles?'

I looked more closely. 'If he did, then the pine needles would be pushed into the mud. And some would be bent.'

'Very good,' he said. 'It's all common sense, isn't it?'

'Yes. So what now?'

'So we go back. It doesn't look like this trail has been walked on in the last couple of weeks. The men went a different way.'

We retraced our steps to the cabin site. It was just after two o'clock

when we got there. Maskwa and I sat on the dock again.

'This is a beautiful lake,' I said. 'Too bad we had to see it this way.'

'You must be a good friend. You came all the way up here.'

'Vinnie would do the same for me.'

We kept sitting there on the dock. The sun shifted west, making the shadows longer. Three o'clock came and went. It was almost three thirty when Vinnie and Guy finally came back.

'What did you find?' Maskwa said.

'Lots of bear tracks,' Guy said. 'Boot prints, too. As far as we could tell, they looked pretty recent. The trail split off, though. And then again. There might be four or five different spurs.'

'And in that one spot—' Vinnie said.

'Yes, a lot of boot prints together. It was hard to say what was going on there.'

'We don't have much light left,' Maskwa said. 'I think we should go back. Tomorrow we can bring radios with us, and more food.'

'I can't leave,' Vinnie said. 'I'd like to spend the night here. If you'd be good enough to leave some food with me, I'll sleep in the cabin.'

'Vinnie,' I said. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'I need to do this, Alex. Tom was here. He slept here. I can feel it. Being here might help me find him.'

'If you spend the night here,' I said, 'then I'm staying, too.'

'Me, too,' Guy said.

'You're not staying here,' Maskwa told him. 'You'll come home with me and help me get ready for tomorrow. Go and get two of those sleeping-bags from the plane. And two flashlights.'

Guy put up a small fight about it, but eventually gave in and climbed into the plane to get our supplies. Vinnie thanked Maskwa a couple of times for everything he had done.

'We'll find your brother,' Maskwa said as he left. 'I promise you.'

We stood there and watched the plane take off. As it cleared the trees, it banked and circled us once and then disappeared south.

Vinnie started collecting sticks to make a fire. I helped him build a tepee-shaped pile of wood. He put some birch bark in the middle and lit it with a match. The bark burst into flame.

'Best fire starter there is,' he said. 'It even burns when it's wet.'

'I'll remember that.'

An hour later, the sun was going down and painting the sky in deep shades of red and orange. Vinnie and I sat by the fire, eating more salami sandwiches and finishing off the Coke and beer.

'It's a nice sky,' Vinnie said. 'Tom probably sat here and watched it.'

'What you said about feeling him here, do you really mean that?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Don't you believe me?'

'I'm not saying I don't.'

'Tom and I used to fight a lot when we were kids. My grandmother told us we shouldn't fight because we had the same blood in our veins. We were part of each other. I didn't really listen to her back then. I wish I could talk to her now. She'd know what to do.'

'You're doing everything you can.'

He put some more wood on the fire. The sky got darker.

'It's getting cold,' I said. 'We should get some sleep.'

'You go ahead. I'll put out the fire.'

I went in and got one of the pots off the stove, cleaned it out as well as I could and then went down to the lake to fill it with water. I heated the water on the stove and washed my face. Then I unrolled a sleeping-bag on one of the bottom bunks and climbed in. I lay listening to the night, wondering when Vinnie would come inside.

I must have dozed off. I woke up in total darkness. I grabbed the flashlight off the floor and shone it around the room. Vinnie wasn't there. I got up out of the sleeping-bag. The wooden floor was cold beneath my feet. 'Vinnie?' I called.

There was no answer. I went through the main room and out of the front door. Vinnie was sitting on the porch, facing the lake. There was a quarter-moon in the night sky. Silver clouds raced in front of it.

'I'm right here,' he said in a quiet voice.

'What are you doing out here?'

'I'm listening. I'll be in soon.'

I went back in and climbed into the sleeping-bag. A little later I heard Vinnie come in and take the bunk next to me.

'You didn't have to stay here,' he said.

'I'm in this far, Vinnie. I'm gonna help you see it through.'

'I don't understand you,' he said. 'Why are you doing this?'

'I made a promise to your mother.'

'You know that's not the only reason.'

'Don't worry about it. Just get some sleep.'

'I know you don't like to talk about it,' he said, 'but there's something inside you that makes you do things like this.'

'Yeah, it's something.'

'I'm serious, Alex. You can be a real pain in the ass, but underneath it all you're the most loyal person I've ever known.'

'Vinnie, I don't have that many friends, OK? It makes me want to hold on to the ones I've got.'

'OK,' he said. 'That sounds good to me. I'm glad I'm one of them.'

'Me, too,' I said. 'Now shut up and go to sleep.'

For a while, I lay there thinking about what he had said. I finally slept for an hour, maybe two. Then suddenly I was awake again. There was a noise in the room.

'Vinnie, what is that?'

I heard him sit up. His flashlight came on, blinding me.

'It's in the other room,' he said.

We both got up at the same time. When he shone the light at the front wall, we saw an enormous face looking at us through the window.

'Go on! Get out of here!' Vinnie yelled. He went into the front room and banged two of the pots together.

'That was one big bear,' he said. 'Did you see him?'

'Yeah, Vinnie, I saw him.'

Vinnie pushed the front door open and went out onto the porch. I followed. We could hear the bear crashing through the brush.

'Alex,' Vinnie said, his head back. 'Look.'

I looked up at the sky. The moon had gone down behind the trees. The clouds had disappeared. It was so dark up here, so far away from any other light. It was just the stars, every star in the heavens, the great expanse of the Milky Way spread out above us.

I stood there with my friend, watching the sky.

Until the sound came. A lonely, inhuman sound, far off in the distance. It was joined by another. And then another.

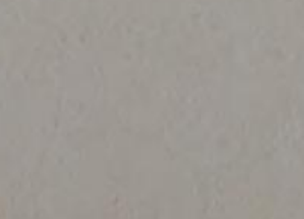
'What the hell is that, Vinnie?'

'I think those are more bears, Alex. Black bears.'

'Black bears? From what planet?'

We stood there under the stars and listened to the wailing of the bears. If I lived a million years, I'd never forget that sound.

FIVE



There's nothing like waking up in a cold, filthy cabin, a hundred miles from anywhere, with no running water.

When I looked over, Vinnie's sleeping-bag was empty. I stood up, put my shoes on and walked outside. Vinnie was kneeling on the dock, washing his face with the lake water.

'Morning,' I said. 'Mind if I use the sink?'

'It's a bit cold,' he said.

I knelt down to splash water on my face and just about pitched myself into the lake. In seconds, my hands went from painful to numb.

We sat on the front porch, having our breakfast of salami sandwiches and hot instant coffee, watching the morning fog drifting across the lake.

'I saw Tom last night,' Vinnie said. 'In my dream. He was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't make out what it was.'

'Did it seem like he was in trouble?'

'No, not at all. He was happier than I've seen him in a long time.'

'When do you suppose Guy and Maskwa will get here?'

'I imagine they'll be here soon.'

We waited around for another hour while the sun came up and burned off the rest of the fog on the lake.

'They might be having some trouble getting that old plane started,' Vinnie said. 'I'd hate to sit here and waste half the day. Why don't we go up the trail a little bit, start looking around?'

'We could leave them a note.'

'Yeah, and we'll hear the plane coming.'

'OK, let's do it,' I said. 'I want to get moving.'

I found an old notepad and a pencil in the cabin, wrote them out a quick note, and left it on the porch. 'OK, show me this trail,' I said.

We set off north, picking up a wide trail that led into the woods. There were no signs of human life whatsoever—no cigarette butts or gum wrappers, no wooden signposts or little marker tags nailed to the trees. The trail belonged only to the animals. For all we knew, it hadn't changed in a thousand years.

Vinnie was walking slowly, looking at the ground in front of him. His footsteps didn't make a sound. 'There are so many bear tracks here,' he said.

'Can I ask a dumb question?' I said.

'Go ahead.'

'How many moose tracks have you seen?'

'Not one,' he said.

'So how good could the moose hunting be on this lake?'

'Sort of explains why they didn't bring one back,' he said.

'Those other guys we saw,' I said, 'the first day we got here. They got a moose, but they were out on a different lake, remember?'

'Yeah. So you're wondering why Albright and his guys came to this lake. It's a good question.'

Something moved ahead of us. We couldn't see what it was, but we

heard the brush moving. Then we heard the sound, the same sound we had heard the night before. It was like a low growl, but with an eerie glottal pulsing to it.

'Vinnie, you're telling me a bear's making that noise?'

'Yes, Alex.'

'How come I've never heard that before?'

'People don't realise how vocal bears can be,' he said, 'or how strange they can sound.'

'That bear we saw last night, it was hard to tell in the dark, but it looked like it had brown fur.'

'It wasn't a true brown bear. Even black bears can have brown fur.'

'How do you tell the difference?'

'The face and shoulders,' he said. 'And the size. Browns are bigger.'

Maybe three miles up the trail we came to a stand of white birch trees. The cold sunlight lit the ground through the bare branches.

'This is where we stopped yesterday,' Vinnie said. 'Can you see all the marks on the ground?'

I bent down and looked. 'All I see are bear tracks,' I said.

'Over here towards the sides.' He pointed a few feet off the trail, by the base of the biggest birch tree. 'Careful where you walk.'

'You make it sound like a crime scene,' I said. Then it occurred to me. A crime scene might be exactly what this was.

'You see the boot prints? There's at least three different boots here. Why so close to the tree? The trail's wide open. And can you see how this boot print is deep on the inside edge? And this one here, too. You wouldn't see that if somebody was just walking normally.'

'So what do you think happened here?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'We need to keep looking.'

'How far up this trail do you wanna go?'

Vinnie didn't answer me. He stood there looking up into the sky. 'Do you hear that?'

'What?' It took a few seconds to pick up the sound. It was a faint buzzing, in the far distance. 'The plane,' I said.

'They're coming. It's about time.'

'So let's go back.'

He looked down at the ground again. 'You think you can find your way back to the cabin?'

'I suppose so. Why?'

'We're just gonna go meet up with them, and then come right back up here. I'd rather just stay here and look around some more.'

'Well, don't go wandering off. We don't want to lose you, too.'

He looked at me.

'Sorry,' I said.

'Bring some water when you come back,' he said.

'Will do,' I said. 'I'll be back soon.' I turned round and took two steps, then stopped. 'Are you sure this is a good idea?' I said.

'Alex, I'm just gonna look around. Go get the guys.'

'All right,' I said. I shook off the little chill that had run up my spine and started down the trail. You're starting to imagine things, I thought. Damned bears and those noises.

I retraced our steps, leaving the white birches behind and heading into the deep shade of the pine trees. The only sound was the steady buzz of the plane, getting louder with each passing minute.

I came back to a small stream we had crossed, jumping over the water and landing hard on the rocks. Then it was back into the pine trees. There were bear tracks all over the place.

And no boot prints.

'All right, stay calm,' I said out loud. I didn't sound very reassuring. 'Just retrace your steps a bit.' When I turned round there was nothing to see but trees. A million trees and no trail.

The plane got louder. It seemed to be circling overhead now, but I couldn't see it through the branches. Maskwa was probably scouting out the terrain up here along the north trail.

I took a few steps back the way I had come, following my boot prints, all the way back to the stream. The plane was north of me now, assuming I had any idea where north was any more. I tried to locate the sun. 'OK, if the sun's there,' I said. 'It's late in the morning, which means that south would be—'

Thataway, you stupid useless white man. I found our boot prints down the original trail. How I'd missed them coming over the stream, I had no idea. I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't tell anyone about my little detour. The plane passed overhead once more, then the sound receded for a few minutes and stopped. They're at the lake, I thought.

I kept walking. They're getting out, reading the note, maybe shaking their heads at our impatience. They're settling down to wait for us. Or more likely they're coming up this trail to find us.

I walked the last mile. The trail opened up to the cabin site.

There was nobody there.

'Ah, horseshit,' I said. 'I knew it. They went off somewhere else. Now what the—?'

I stopped. There was no plane at the dock.

I stood there for a full minute, trying to make sense of it. I had heard the plane in the air, had heard it land. I went over to the cabin and looked on the porch. The note was just where I had left it.

'What the hell?' The lake bent round to the right—maybe they had landed the plane on the far shore. I found the trail that Maskwa and I had explored the day before and began walking. I moved fast, following the curve of the shoreline. I wanted to find that damned plane so I could get rid of this prickly little ball in my stomach. I flashed back on the way Maskwa had had to muscle that flimsy old plane into the sky and I moved faster, running now, trying to see through the trees. 'Be there, goddamn it. I want to see that plane.'

How old was Maskwa, anyway? Sixty years old at least? Seventy? And that plane, hell, for all I knew, it was just as old.

The trees opened up. I went over a rock and landed in the shallow water. I didn't even think about how cold it was on my feet. Where was that plane?

I waded out until I was standing up to my knees in freezing water.

Lake Agawaatese was empty.

I came back to the shore, climbed over the rock and landed on the trail. I had two wet boots, along with all the rest of my problems.

My problems, hell. If Maskwa and Guy went down in the woods . . .

I tried to replay it in my head. I had heard the plane above me. It seemed to circle and head back south, so it would have approached the lake from that direction—more or less the direction I was walking. I hadn't seen or heard anything. Wouldn't a crash make some sort of noise? Or would the trees just reach up and . . . catch them?

I headed back to the cabin site in my soaking boots. I started to run again. That little ball of dread in my stomach was spreading through my entire body. I could feel it burning in my intestines, squeezing my lungs, and tightening the muscles in my back.

When I got back to the cabin, I was fighting for breath.

Get a hold of yourself, Alex. You've got to think.

Water, that was the first thing I needed. Get some water in your body, and then you can think straight. I went into the cabin. It was exactly as we'd left it. We had boiled water in a big pot on the stove that morning and then covered it with a lid when we left. I picked up the lid, dipped a coffee mug in, lifted it to my lips and drank.

OK, I thought. That's good. Now what?

Now you go out and start looking for that plane. They may both be alive and need your help, very badly.

Vinnie. I'll go back up the trail. I'll get Vinnie, we'll come back

down here, and we'll find them. Vinnie will need water, too. I went back outside, grabbed an empty plastic Coke bottle from the cooler, came back in and filled it. OK, I thought. I'm ready. Let's go.

I hurried up the trail, looking into the shadows on either side of me. I imagined seeing the plane leaning nose-down against a big pine tree. Easy, Alex. Blind panic won't help anyone. I kept walking, a mile into the woods, over the stream, then onto the trail again. Finally I got to the stand of birch trees. Vinnie wasn't there.

'Vinnie!' I yelled. 'Vinnie! Where the hell are you?'

Nothing.

'Vinnie!'

The far-off sound of a bear. Nothing else.

I had to try to pick up his footprints on the trail. I'd already proved to myself how bad I was at tracking, but it turned out to be easy, because he had been walking here in the last couple of hours.

I followed his tracks and picked up the sound of running water. And something else I couldn't quite make out. Probably more bears.

'Vinnie!'

Did I hear something then? It was hard to tell. I kept walking. The water sounds grew louder. Finally, I came to a waterfall, maybe eight feet from top to bottom, and splashing on the rocks. Then I saw the boot prints. Vinnie had gone up the side of this stream, up this jumbled mass of rocks and dirt, to the top. I followed the prints, grabbing on to rocks and roots.

As I stumbled onto the top, I saw it all at once. I saw the bears, two of them, one black, one cinnamon-brown, all fur and teeth and nails, one of them on its hind legs, suspended in the air. Vinnie swinging a long stick in slow motion, making a wide arc that would have been graceful in any other place than this sudden hell. The ground all churned up, like a battlefield. A clearing, the sun shining down. The sleeve of Vinnie's coat in tatters, blood on his arm.

I saw it all for a moment that lasted for ever, feeling like I was seeing it from far away, out of my own body, until finally it all snapped into place and I knew what was happening.

The bears were attacking Vinnie. He was screaming and trying to beat them off with a stick. I yelled something and ran to him along the edge of the stream. The bears were on either side of him now, the ground itself a morass of black soil and stones and dead grass, torn up in strips.

And something long and white.

Bones. God help me, bones.

As I came to him, I saw the bones. A hand. Black fingers locked in a twisted claw. White fingernails. A leg half buried in the dirt.

This is what happened. They are dead. All the men are dead. The bears killed them and now they will kill us, too.

'Get away!' Vinnie's raw voice. 'Get out of here!'

I screamed at the bears. I waved my arms. 'Get away! Go! Go!'

The smell. The stench washed over me, God, the rotting bodies.

And something else.

Vinnie swung his stick. 'Get away!' he yelled. 'Get away!'

One bear turned away, the one with the brown fur.

'Get away! Get away, goddamn you!'

I couldn't tell which of us was yelling any more.

The black bear made his horrible inhuman noise, looked at us with yellow eyes and turned away, towards the woods.

Vinnie kept screaming.

That smell. A long time ago in Detroit. The same smell. That burning house. The fire. The body bags, zipped up tight.

I looked down at it. I had to look down. The white bones, the flesh. Black. Blacker than the bear. Blacker than evil.

They were burned. The bodies were burned. The bears didn't do this. The bears didn't kill these men.

And the bears weren't attacking Vinnie. It was Vinnie who was attacking the bears. He'd seen what they were doing, seen they were desecrating this shallow grave. He was driving them away.

Vinnie was bent over now, with his face in his hands. He dropped to his knees. 'Oh my God, Tom, oh my God.'

He sat back on his heels and cried. The bodies of five men were spread all around us, pieces above the ground, pieces below.

I dug into the dirt, took it in both hands, and threw it over what was once a man's head. I did it again and again, digging with my bare hands and covering the bodies, spreading the dirt over everything I could see. My hands were scraped raw by the rough earth, but I kept at it. It was a primitive need to bury something dead.

When I had done as much as I could do, I went to Vinnie and pulled him up by the armpits. I turned him round and held his head on my shoulder. He didn't fight me.

I looked at his left arm. A bear had raked a claw down his forearm, right through his coat, leaving three deep cuts. I needed to clean his arm off and wrap it up. 'Come on,' I said. 'We have to go.' I grabbed his other arm. He was holding something tight in his hand. 'What is it, Vinnie?' I said. I lifted his hand and looked.

It was a watch, caked with dirt, the crystal shattered.

'Come on,' I said. 'Come on.' I tried to lead him back towards the stream, but he started to resist me.

'No,' he said. 'No, no.'

'Come on, Vinnie.' I pushed him. 'Let's go.'

'No,' he said. But he was too weak to fight me. He had nothing left.

I found the Coke bottle lying by the foot of the waterfall. I unscrewed the top and poured some water into Vinnie's mouth. Then I took a drink and put the bottle in my coat pocket. I turned Vinnie like a robot and pointed him south.

We walked all the way back, three miles down the trail. I kept Vinnie's body moving forward, but I had no idea where his mind was. A good hour later, I had him back in the cabin, sitting at the kitchen table. I filled the big pot with water and put it on the stove to boil. I didn't see a first-aid kit anywhere, so I stripped down and took off my undershirt, and tore it into strips. I threw the strips into the water, and added the dishtowel that had been hanging on a nail in the wall. Vinnie sat there the whole time, looking at nothing.

As I waited for the water to boil, I began to realise how tired I was, how hungry, how much my back hurt, how miserable my feet felt in the wet boots. I couldn't solve anything else, so I focused on the small stuff. Get Vinnie cleaned up, and then get these boots off.

The water was finally boiling. I stirred it all up with a big spoon, and then I fished out the dishtowel. I grabbed the little bottle of dish-washing soap, went over and sat down next to Vinnie.

'This is gonna hurt,' I said as I put his left arm on the table, push-ing the sleeve of his coat up. As soon as I touched his arm with the hot towel, he stood up and pushed me away.

'Tom,' he said. 'I've got to help Tom. The bears—'

'They're gone,' I said. 'Sit down, Vinnie. The bears are gone.'

I pulled him back down, squeezed out the soap onto the hot towel and pressed it onto his arm. He closed his eyes.

I washed him off as well as I could, starting with the cuts in his arm, then his face. The blood turned the towel pink.

'These cuts aren't as bad as I thought,' I said to him. 'It's a good thing you had this coat on.' I took a strip of fabric and pressed it against his arm.

He looked at me. For the first time since I found him up there, he looked right at me. His eyes were red.

'We've got another problem,' I said, wrapping another strip round his arm. 'The plane came back a while ago. It circled a couple of

times and then landed. Or at least I thought it did. But when I got back, the plane wasn't here. It must have gone down in the woods.'

Vinnie kept looking at me, until it finally sank in. He turned his head and looked out at the lake.

'You can't land anywhere else,' I said.

As soon as I said it, I knew it wasn't true. You can land somewhere else. There were other lakes. If you flew over this lake and kept going north, and you saw that the bears were uncovering your secret, the secret you had buried in the loose ground on the side of the stream, you would know that Vinnie and Alex were about to become your biggest problem. And so you would circle back and land your plane, but not on this lake. You land on a different lake. You know these woods. You know there's a trail to Lake Agawaatese.

You come quietly.

'Vinnie,' I said. 'We've got to get out of here.' I stood up and walked out onto the porch. Vinnie came with me. I followed the line of trees with my eyes, all the way round the lake.

That's when I heard the first gunshot.

VINNIE WAS DOWN. That was the first thing that came to me. I ran over to him and said his name, saw blood on the side of his face. I heard another shot. Wood chips flew from the side of the cabin.

I grabbed him by the coat and pulled him to his feet. There was another gunshot, and then another. Everything after that was a mad rush of fear and adrenaline. We ran like animals, tripping over rocks and roots, pine boughs lashing our faces. There was nothing left but running. No thought. No sanity. No reason.

Vinnie tripped and went down hard. I picked him up, just as we heard a branch snapping somewhere behind us. We kept running. He went one way round a great rock, I went another. I thought I'd pick him up on the other side, but he wasn't there.

There was a stream here, maybe the same stream we had seen before, maybe not. I had no idea where the hell I was. I almost called his name out loud, then realised how suicidal that would be. I stopped and listened. I could hear nothing but my own breathing and the soft sound of the water on the rocks.

Something moved in my peripheral vision. I ducked instinctively, waiting for the rifle blast. Vinnie's face appeared round the trunk of a tree. He was holding his right ear, the whole side of his face painted in blood. He was leaning against the tree like it was the only thing holding him upright.

I went to him, pushed his hand away, and looked at his face. He brushed me away and pointed at the ground. I looked down and saw my footprints. It was pretty damn easy for them to find us.

'Come on, this way,' I said. I led Vinnie downstream for a good hundred yards, cutting back against our original direction. The water was cold and it soaked my boots again, but what the hell.

We jumped out of the stream and hit the woods, unable to run any more. We squeezed our way between trees and climbed over rocks until we came to a ridge of exposed rock. I peered over it and saw that there was an overhang. I helped Vinnie to crawl over the ledge. He collapsed right there, his back against the wall of rock.

I brushed him off and finally got a good look at his face. There was a long furrow in his cheek, where the bullet had grazed him. His right ear lobe was gone. He was breathing hard.

'Ah, shit, Vinnie,' I said. 'Give me your arm.'

He was losing blood a lot faster from his face, so I rolled up his sleeve and untied his bandage. I took it off and pressed it against his cheek and his ear. He struggled, but I held on tight. Finally, he gave up and went limp against me. I leaned back against the rock, closed my eyes and listened.

Every sound in the forest, every mouse running over a leaf, every breath of wind made me wonder if they had found us. They could be standing on top of the ridge right now, looking down at us, waiting for us to move so they could shoot us. It's just a matter of time, I thought. You're gonna die here, just like Tom and those other men.

Those other men. They have to be the reason for all this. Somehow, they got hooked up with something bad, and Tom went down with them. And now us. I hung my head. I was so exhausted, I felt myself sliding into a half-awake dream. I felt pine branches hitting me in the face, felt my legs running, my lungs aching for air . . .

Something woke me up with a start. A sudden noise above us. I held my breath and listened.

Nothing.

I looked at Vinnie. His eyes were open. 'Alex,' he said.

'What is it?' I was still holding the bloodstained cloth against the side of his head.

'We've got to figure out what to do.' He took the cloth from me and pushed himself up. Blood dripped down his neck.

'Keep holding that,' I said. 'You've got to keep the pressure on.'

He winced as he put the cloth back to his face. 'I think we're having ourselves a bad day,' he said.

How he could make a joke like that, I couldn't even imagine. But it made me feel better. Somehow, the Vinnie I knew was back. It made me feel like we still had a fighting chance.

'This might be a dumb question,' I said, 'but why would they leave us out here overnight and then come back the next day? Why didn't they just kill us yesterday?'

'Alex, that wasn't Guy and Maskwa shooting at us. Guy and Maskwa would have found us by now. And they wouldn't have shot at us from so far away because they knew we weren't armed. Anybody else would have had to be a lot more careful.'

I thought about it. 'OK, so who is it?'

He took the cloth off his face, turned it over, then put it back. 'God only knows. Whoever did that . . .' He pointed in the general direction behind us. I didn't have to wonder what he was talking about. 'Whoever that was, I think that's who we're talking about.'

'If it's not Guy and Maskwa,' I said, 'then where are they?'

'Maybe they already got to them,' he said. His voice was drained of all emotion. 'First them and now us. Time's not on our side. We've got to get to them soon, while we still have some strength left.'

'Do you think they're at the cabin?'

'Probably. Our only chance is to try to sneak up on them. We should wait until nightfall.'

'What, try to go back there in the dark? They'll have lights.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'That'll be our only advantage. If it's like last night, there'll be enough moonlight for us to see everything we need to. If they have flashlights, their eyes won't adjust to the dark.'

'OK,' I said. 'We take our shot at 'em. We do it tonight.'

'Look at that sky,' he said. Through the branches we could see another blazing sunset. 'Last night I was thinking, that's Tom's sky, the "Pleasing Sky", the sun going down in the west. I thought it was a good omen.' He closed his eyes and kept them closed for a long time.

'Vinnie, are you all right?'

'Our grandmother used to tell us these stories,' he said. 'These stories about our ancestors, all the things they did, the ceremonies, the medicines. She made sure we learned our real history. She made us promise we'd remember it and tell it to our own children.'

He stopped to wipe his eyes with one hand. He kept the other held tight against his face. The blood was drying on his fingers.

'You don't go to war for land, or for power. You go to war to avenge your brother's death. You gather your warriors, you gather your medicines. You make a war pole, you do your war dance. You

sing the war song. I don't remember how the song goes, but there's one part that always stuck with me. Something about looking up at the sky and seeing the red, and knowing that someone would die. "Blood is the sky." That's the line I remember. "Blood is the sky."'

He dipped one finger into the dirt and rubbed a streak across each cheek. 'You paint your face with black,' he said. He dipped his finger in the dirt again, leaned over and put a streak on each of my cheeks.

He took some of his own blood and rubbed another streak on each cheek, above the black. 'And red,' he said. He took more blood and rubbed it on my face.

'Then you're ready,' he said. 'You're ready to go to war.'

WE WAITED FOR THE SUN to go down. The darkness seemed to creep in all around our little overhang until we were totally swallowed by it. We kept close together, trying to stay warm. As I shivered I could feel the last gallon in my tank burning away to nothing.

'Are you ready to go?' Vinnie said finally.

'Of course.' I said it like I actually believed it. 'What if they're out looking for us?'

'They won't be, not unless they have flashlights. And then we'll see them long before they see us.'

'OK,' I said. 'Let's do it.'

Standing up was an ordeal. We had just spent the last few hours sitting on the cold ground, leaning against the rocks. It took me a full minute to straighten out my back. Vinnie nearly passed out.

We climbed back over the little ridge and started picking our way through the trees. My feet were numb from the cold.

A branch caught me full in the face. I shook it off, kept walking, and took it in the face again.

'Alex, don't look right at where you're walking,' Vinnie said. 'You have better night vision if you use the sides of your eyes.'

It took a few minutes until I got the hang of it. Once we got out from under the trees, the moonlight made everything come alive with an eerie glow. I stopped to catch my breath.

'The stream's just up ahead,' Vinnie said.

'Can we drink from it?'

'There might be a few little things swimming around in it. Right now I wouldn't worry about that.'

We heard the stream long before we got to it. The trees opened up and there was moonlight shining bright on the rocks. Vinnie held me back. He listened for a long time, and then we both went to

the stream, got down on our knees, and drank the cold water.

'How far away are we from the cabin?' I asked. 'It felt like we were running for ever.'

'Probably not as far as you think. That trail has to be down the river here pretty soon.'

We followed the stream maybe a half-mile until we found the trail. Vinnie bent down to look closely at the ground. He stood up and looked all around us. 'They were here,' he whispered.

'Can you tell how many?'

'No, not in this light. Somebody was here, though.'

We headed south down the trail, making as little noise as possible. When I stepped on a twig, the sudden snap was like a gunshot.

'Shit,' I said. 'Sorry about that.'

Vinnie let out his breath and kept walking. He seemed to know just how to pick up and plant his feet without making the slightest sound. I tried to follow in his footsteps. A few minutes later, he stopped.

'What is it?' I whispered.

He didn't say anything. Then I noticed where we were. It was the stand of birch trees, ghostly white in the moonlight. This was where he had found all the boot prints, and now it all made sense. There had been a struggle here. The bodies were only a half-mile away.

I put my hand on Vinnie's back. 'Come on, let's keep going.'

He didn't resist me, but took off down the trail, walking quickly. He wasn't quiet any more, kicking up dead branches and leaves.

I caught up to him and slowed him down.

'Find something you can swing,' he said. He picked up a long stick from the side of the trail, dropped it, looked for another.

'Vinnie, you've got to get a hold of yourself. They'll hear us.'

He picked up another stick and swung it. 'I want to kill somebody, Alex. For the first time in my life I really want to kill somebody.'

'I'm with you,' I said. 'Let's do it right. We'll only get one chance.'

He tapped the end of the stick in his free hand, testing its weight. 'This one will do.'

I looked around on the forest floor for my own club. I settled on a straight piece of pine that was light enough to swing and hard enough to really hurt somebody. If I got the chance to use it.

We slowed to a crawl as we got closer to the cabin. At last, we were near enough to see it through the trees. It was completely dark. We each got down on one knee and stayed there, perfectly still, watching the cabin and everything around it. Nothing moved.

'What do you think?' I whispered.

'I don't think they're in there. But we can't just walk in.'

'The only windows are in front,' I said. 'We should go one on each side, until we get to the door, then throw something, see what happens.'

'If they shoot?'

'Then we go for it. Hit them as they come out the door.'

'All right,' he said. 'I'll take the left side, you take the right.'

'If nothing happens, I'm gonna go in,' I said. 'You should move back into the woods.'

'No,' he said. 'I'll try to cover you. You'll be pretty safe inside if they're outside. If they start shooting, I'll try to pick up on where they're shooting from.'

I took a deep breath. 'OK,' I said. 'Here goes nothing.'

'Wait,' he said, looking up at the sky.

A single cloud moved across the sky and hid the moon. We waited for the cloud to pass and then picked our way through the brush into the clearing. I expected gunshots at any second.

As we crept closer, a slight wind carried the trace of a noise from far away. The bears again. I swallowed and kept moving.

When we got to the cabin, I went round the right side. It was unnerving, not being able to see what Vinnie was doing. I found the plastic lid from a garbage can. That would be my decoy. When I got to the front of the cabin, I peeped round the corner and caught Vinnie's eye. He gave me a little nod. I threw the lid at the front door. It hit the frame and then the ground. Clunk, clunk.

Nothing happened.

I waited another minute. Then I turned the corner and made my way to the door, keeping low. I looked in through the screen window, couldn't see a damned thing. I eased the door open and slipped inside. I stood for a while, giving my eyes a chance to adjust. A thin stream of light came in through the front window and shapes started to appear in the room. I saw the table, the stove, the refrigerator.

They had trashed the place. It was a mess before—now it was destroyed. There were pieces of Styrofoam all over the floor, and what looked like the stuffing from our sleeping-bags. I took a look in the back room. The wood stove had been pushed over. I came back into the kitchen, checked the refrigerator and the cupboards. Every bit of food was gone. The pots and pans were gone, even the utensils.

I got down on my hands and knees. Maybe they had missed something. There was something silver under the table. I reached out and grabbed it. A half-roll of duct tape. I put it in my coat pocket.

A sound. Outside. Something close.

Where did I put that goddamn club?

Over there by the door. I grabbed it and crouched down next to the door, waiting for it to open. The sounds got closer. My heart was pounding in my chest. This is it. This is the showdown.

It was joined by another sound. Hissing. It sounded like—

Shit, it was Vinnie. What was he doing?

I looked out of the window. A big black bear was coming towards the cabin. Vinnie was hissing at him, trying to keep him away.

I slipped out of the door and waved at Vinnie. We met up at the back of the cabin, moving quickly, back into the cover of the trees.

'I didn't know what to do,' he said. 'I didn't want that bear to come right through that window again.'

'He can have the place now,' I said. 'They destroyed everything.'

'That figures. If they're not gonna be there themselves tonight—'

'Maybe they'll come back, though. Should we stick around?'

He leaned over with his hands on his knees. 'I don't know, Alex.'

'Let's move back in the woods,' I said. 'If they come back, we should be able to hear them.'

We made our way through the trees until we were about a hundred yards away, then hid behind a thick mass of hemlock.

I took the roll of duct tape out of my coat pocket, made Vinnie roll his sleeve up, and taped up his arm. 'It ain't perfect,' I said. 'But it'll do for now.'

His face was a different story. I knew I had to do something with it, but the slightest touch made him flinch. 'Here,' I said, grabbing a stick. 'Bite this. And hold your hair up.'

He did as he was told. I stretched a piece of tape from his jaw, across his cheek, over his ruined ear, and round to the other side of his face. Then I put another piece of tape over the first, and then another. It looked like hell, but it seemed to stop the bleeding.

He sat down in the dirt, leaned back against a tree trunk and closed his eyes. I sat down next to him.

'We need another plan,' I said.

Vinnie didn't answer me. His head bobbed down, snapped back up, then bobbed down again.

'You should rest awhile,' I said, pulling him closer, so he could lean against my shoulder, with the bad side of his face in the air.

'No,' he said. But he put his head on my shoulder and kept it there.

I spent the next couple of hours just sitting there, careful not to move. As I drifted off, I wondered if the next time I closed my eyes would be my last.

SIX

I opened my eyes. There was a dim light, and a wet fog hung in the air. When I tried to straighten out my neck, the pain ran right down my back. This cannot be happening, I thought.

My heart stopped when I realised Vinnie wasn't sitting next to me. For one horrible moment, I wondered if they had killed him like the others. Then I heard him behind me.

'Good morning,' he said. He was carving the end of a long stick into a sharp point.

'Is that a knife?'

'Just a little jackknife. Too small to hurt anybody.' He put the stick down. 'Want some breakfast?'

'What do you mean?'

'Here,' he said. He threw me the plastic bottle I'd had in my coat. He must have gone to the stream to fill it with water. 'I found some dandelions. Something to put in your stomach.' He dropped a couple of plants in my lap and started working on another long stick.

I took a long drink of water and tried taking a bite of one of the leaves. It tasted like bitter lettuce.

'Today's the day, Alex. Are you ready?'

I looked at him. I couldn't understand why he suddenly had so much more energy than I did. 'Vinnie, are you all right?'

'For now, I am. Tonight will be a different story.'

'What are you talking about?'

'By the end of the day we'll be really hurting. There's hardly anything edible up here. It's too late in the year for insects. We can't signal for help, not that anybody else is even gonna fly over here. We can't build a fire, because they'd find us in a minute. We can't get back on our own. It's too far. We've only got one hope.'

'What's that?'

'Their plane.'

'What are we gonna do? Steal their plane and fly it?'

'Not unless you know how. I was thinking about their radio. Think about it, Alex. We know the plane's still here, right? We know they're somewhere south of here. We have to find the plane.'

'OK, that makes sense.'

'You know what else? If we find their plane, we'll find them.'

'And the plane's their vulnerable spot,' I said. 'They have to protect it as it's their only way out, too.'

'Exactly. We have to hit them there. We don't have any choice.'

I pulled myself to my feet. I had never felt more drained in my entire life. Vinnie handed me one of his sharpened spears. 'One way or another,' he said. 'We have to end this today.'

We made our way round the lake to the western trail, keeping hidden in the woods. When we got to the trail, Vinnie checked the ground.

'Somebody came this way,' he said. 'Heading away from the cabin.'

'We've got to be careful. They could be anywhere right now.'

He nodded as he looked around. 'They know we're coming.'

'What, to their plane?'

'Yeah, think about it. They know the same thing we know. Getting to that plane is our only hope. We've got to go around the trail, get to the plane some other way.'

It's not what I wanted to hear, but I knew he was right. We left the trail, climbing rocks to the higher ground that seemed to run parallel, using our spears for leverage. When we got to the top, we saw that what we thought was higher ground was just an illusion. The land gave way again and then rose to yet another hill, and then probably another. We had to climb back down and then fight our way through thick brush, and then climb again. The sun came up, but it wasn't enough to burn off the morning fog.

After an hour of picking our way over the rocks and through the brush, we stopped to rest. We emptied the bottle of water.

'We should come to another stream,' Vinnie said, breathing hard. 'All these lakes are connected.'

'Are your feet killing you, too?' Beyond the cold and the wet, I could feel the blisters growing with each step.

'I'm trying not to think about it,' he said.

We kept going. As long as the rising sun stayed on our left, we knew we were moving in the right direction. But it was too slow. We went for another hour. Then another. The sun rose higher in the sky.

Vinnie tried to step over a great fallen tree. He misjudged the height and ended up tumbling right over it. He lay on the ground with his head on the rotting wood, his eyes closed.

'Vinnie, are you all right?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Come on, get up.' I grabbed his hand.

'I'm sorry, Alex. I'm sorry. This is all my fault.'

I sat down on the log. 'Just rest a minute,' I said.

'I'm trying to get us out of here.'

I looked down at him. All that energy he seemed to have had earlier, it was just a show. It was for me. Now he was paying for it.

'The lake's gotta be close now,' I said. 'We're almost there.'

He didn't move. 'Guy and Maskwa,' he said. 'A kid and his grandfather. They're dead, Alex. And we're next.'

'Get up, Vinnie.' I reached down and hooked my hands under his arms. When I pulled him up, everything went black for a moment. I fought off the dizziness and pushed him forwards.

We walked for another hour. There were no words spoken between us. We met up with the trail again, and saw a perfectly preserved boot print right in the middle of it. Shortly after that, we heard a stream. When we got to it, we both dropped our spears, fell down on the ground and drank the cold water. If someone had seen us at that moment, he could have walked right up and shot us in the head.

I sat up and splashed the water on my face. It was so cold it hurt. 'This stream must lead to the lake,' I said.

Vinnie didn't answer me. He was on his hands and knees, the water dripping from his face. 'Do you hear it?' he said.

'Hear what?'

'The water,' he said. 'It's making music.'

'Don't leave me, Vinnie. Don't give up.'

'The water flows from the four hills to the Path of Souls.'

I crawled over to him, grabbed his collar and pulled him up so he was facing me. The tape was coming off his face. New blood ran down his neck.

'Vinnie, I'm gonna tape you up again. And then we're gonna go get the guys who killed your brother. OK?'

'The Path of Souls, Alex. Tom's already there.'

'Yes,' I said. 'He's there. But it's not your time yet. Or mine.'

He looked into my eyes for a long time. Then he nodded. When I had put new tape on his face, he reached into his pocket and pulled out Tom's wristwatch. He touched the hands through the broken crystal. 'Let's go find them,' he said.

We filled our water bottle, then followed the stream for the next half-hour. The sound of water running over rocks was hypnotic.

Then, a sudden noise. We both froze. It sounded like something moving in water. A boat, maybe?

We walked slowly, careful not to make a noise, holding our spears with both hands like a pair of primitive hunters. I could see the water now through the trees. The stream ran into a small lake, maybe fifty

yards away. We made our way down to the shoreline, hiding behind the thick wall of trees. Finally we saw what was making the noise.

It was a moose, calmly chewing on a green mass of water plants. On another day it would have been funny, finally seeing a moose up here.

I let my breath out. And then I saw the plane in the distance.

'That plane—' Vinnie said. He stood behind the tree next to mine, looking out at the water.

'It's Gannon's.'

'That's what I thought.'

The lake was maybe a quarter-mile across. The plane was right in the middle, spinning slowly in the wind. It had to be anchored there. The nose of the plane drifted round towards us.

Somebody was sitting on one of the floats. The bottoms of his boots were just skimming the water. He was wearing a green poncho. And that hat. I recognised it. Gannon was right there in front of us, sitting outside his plane. The way his hat was tipped forward, it looked like he was asleep.

'Am I seeing things?' Vinnie said. 'Is Gannon really just sitting out there taking a nap?'

'If he is, we've got to get to him before he wakes up. Think we can swim out there without making too much noise?'

'We don't have to,' Vinnie said. 'Look.'

He pointed to a spot along the shoreline, maybe a third of the way round from where we were standing. A yellow rubber raft was drifting lazily, just a few feet from shore.

'I don't like this, Vinnie. It's too easy.'

'How many men flew in, do you think?'

'Well, if Gannon is involved in all this, then everyone else at the lodge has to be, too, right?'

'You would think,' he said. 'Unless—'

'Unless he did this all on his own.'

'Didn't Helen say she wasn't even there at the lodge when they came back?'

'You're right,' I said. 'And we didn't talk to Ron and Millie at all. For all we know, Gannon was the only person around that morning.'

'So is this a trap?' Vinnie said. 'Or is this our only chance?'

I looked out at the lake—the plane slowly turning, Gannon on the float, his hat turned down. 'Something's just not right. He's too slumped over to be comfortable. You know what? I don't think that's a person at all.'

'You mean it's a dummy?'

'Can you even see his arms?'

Vinnie shielded his eyes, took a long look. 'No.'

'Of course not. That big poncho covering everything? And the big hat covering his face? No way, Vinnie. We're not falling for it.'

He took a breath. 'OK,' he said. 'So they're on the perimeter somewhere. We've got to sneak up on them. They won't be expecting us to come through the woods. That'll be our only advantage.'

'I don't know, Vinnie. I don't think that's enough. They'll pick us off in two seconds. Can't we make them tip their hand somehow?'

As soon as I said it, I knew the answer.

'Alex, are you thinking—?'

'Yes,' I said. 'If I can draw their fire, we'll know where they are.'

'How are you gonna do that?'

'I'll take the boat out. If they start shooting, I'll try to get back to shore. Or something.'

'If they've got a good rifle you'll be dead on the first shot.'

'Vinnie, I can't sneak up on them like you can. I've got to go out there and give you a chance to get to them. OK?'

He looked at me, then out at the lake. 'If they see just you, they'll know something is up.'

'They shot you, remember? As far as they know, you're dead.'

He shook his head. 'Goddamn it.'

'If you were them, where would you be?' I said. 'I mean, where would you be waiting to get a good shot.'

'The trail's over there,' he said, pointing to our right, past where the boat was floating. 'If I had a good scope, I'd want to be positioned somewhere over this way.' He pointed back to our left.

'Give me time to get over to the boat,' I said. 'Then move down that way. You should see some movement when they start shooting.'

'What if there are two of them? On opposite sides of the lake?'

I squeezed his shoulders. 'Then we go down fighting,' I said.

He gave me a little smile and nodded his head.

'Here, take this,' I said. I gave him my spear.

'Get under the boat.'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't get in the boat. Get under it,' he said.

'That'll be pretty damned cold.'

'Water slows down bullets. You want cold or you want dead?'

'Good point.'

'I'll buy you a beer when we get out of here,' he said.

'I'll remember that. Thanks.'

And that's how I left him. I started making my way round the lake. I couldn't help wondering if I was going to run into them here in the trees, before we got to try out our brilliant plan. I almost laughed out loud. I don't know why I was feeling so calm. I should have been scared out of my mind. Maybe this was the end, and I was already walking down that Path of Souls that Vinnie had talked about.

Get a grip, Alex. Get a grip.

I worked my way down to the water. I was twenty yards away from the yellow raft now, hiding behind the last tree. Once I leave the trees I'm gonna have to do this fast. Get in the water, get under the raft and start moving. OK, so I am scared. This is OK. What the hell.

I looked down the shore. I couldn't see Vinnie, but I knew he was there. My hands were shaking. Easy, man.

The plane was maybe two hundred yards away. It kept turning slowly. The dummy Gannon with his hat down, slumped against one of the float supports—how stupid did they think we were?

This is insane. Quickly I took off my coat. Here we go. Wherever you're hiding, boys, wake up. It's showtime.

I didn't want to give them a free shot at me on the shore, so I tried to get in the water and get under the raft all in one quick motion.

It didn't work out that way.

Instead, I took one step into the water and sank all the way up to my knees in cold muck. I spent what felt like minutes trying to get myself unstuck. Surely the men with the rifles already had me sighted in. They were probably just amusing themselves for a moment, watching me struggle in the mud.

With a desperate lunge I fell forwards and caught the raft with one hand. The sudden sharp pain in my shoulder as I reached out was obliterated by the icy shock of the water. Everything I had been through came rushing out in one primal scream as I pulled the boat over my head and the first bullet came ripping through all in the same moment. The crack of the gun sounded far away, quickly lost in the hissing of the punctured raft and my own voice in my ears.

I kicked at the bottom of the lake, untangling myself from the muck and weeds and trying to push myself farther out into the lake. Another bullet punched through the rubber and splashed right next to my ear. I dropped my head under the water, more icy shock, and the whole world went silent except for the ringing in my ears.

I am losing it, I thought, in a little voice that seemed to be watching the whole struggle from outside my body.

I went up to the surface and took a breath, dropped back down

and tried to kick my way into the lake to get the raft moving. A mouthful of dirty water and I'm coughing it up, my face above the surface, and the raft is folding in on itself.

Another shot and I pushed the raft away from me, the little voice telling me in its obscene calm that the raft was the target and I needed to get away from it. I'm pushing it with both hands but it's like a wet parachute draped all over me, until I go back down and claw at it. And then it's moving over me and away at last.

I am seizing up now with the cold, but the voice says to stay flat and to grab on to the weeds with my hands and keep everything under water, everything but the very tip of my nose, which I must slowly . . . slowly . . . move up out of the water. Yes, that's it . . .

I am so close to the surface now I can see the sky, see the trees, the sun. But I am so cold, I'm gonna have to get out of this water. I'll run for it and Gannon can shoot me in the back if he wants, I don't care, I can't do this for one more second. This is it.

I got up on my hands and knees, fighting my way through the green tentacles and tearing up both ankles and both knees getting onto the shore and up the slope into the trees. I knew the shots would come at any second and cut me down, but somehow it didn't happen. I was in the woods, falling to the ground, covered with dirt and leaves and pine needles. I didn't remember grabbing my coat, but there it was. I wrapped it round me and looked out at the lake. The raft was mostly submerged, a faint yellow secret in the dark water.

I listened hard. There was nothing to hear but my own breathing.

Vinnie, where are you?

I kept listening. Nothing.

I got to my feet, limped back down towards the water. I stood by a tree, and looked out across the water and all along the shore.

Nothing.

The hell with it. I gathered my breath. 'Vinnie!'

The sound echoed across the lake and back, then died.

'Vinnie!'

The wind picked up. I was shivering so hard now.

'Alex!'

Dear God. 'Vinnie! Where are you?'

'I'm here,' he said. 'To your right. About two hundred yards.'

He was in the opposite direction from where we had started. He'd had to run all that way round the lake. How had he done it?

I made my way over to him, stumbling through the trees. When I finally got there, he was standing still, his back to me.

'Vinnie.'

He didn't say anything. He didn't move. When I came up to him, I saw what he was looking at.

Hank Gannon was on the ground, lying on his side. The spear had run clean through his back, out through his chest. There was blood on his shirt, the blood that pumps bright red out of a chest wound. He was shaking and spitting up blood. He looked up at us.

'I've been asking him why,' Vinnie said.

Gannon moved his lips. He couldn't speak. A bolt action .306 rifle was lying on the ground behind him. I reached over and picked it up. I saw a boater's key chain sticking out of his hip pocket, the kind with the float attached to it. I took it and put it in my own pocket.

'He won't tell me,' Vinnie said. 'He won't tell me why he killed my brother. He won't tell me why he . . . burned him.' Vinnie leaned down. He was about to do something—take Gannon by the throat, run the spear through him again.

'Vinnie,' I said, grabbing his arm. 'We need to get out of here. If there's anybody else up here, they heard the shots.'

He wouldn't move. He kept watching Gannon bleed.

'Come on, I'm going out to the plane.' I pulled him away. Gannon was not dead yet, but I knew it would happen soon.

The last thing I wanted to do was get in that water again, but we needed to get to the plane. 'Take your coat off,' I said. 'Hold it over your head.'

Vinnie had that same blank expression on his face, the way he looked when I found him fighting off the bears, but he took his coat off and started to wade out into the water. I took my coat off and wrapped it round the rifle. When we were both deep enough, we swam side stroke, moving slowly through the water, working hard to keep our coats dry.

'Vinnie, you all right?'

He didn't answer, but he was still swimming. So I kept my eyes on the plane and made myself do it. Fifty yards away, twenty. Finally, we were there. The plane had spun round now, so that the Gannon dummy was on the opposite side. I grabbed the float and hauled myself up to the ladder. The side door was ajar. I pulled it open and threw in my coat and the rifle. Vinnie was a few yards behind me. I waited until he was close enough for me to grip his hand.

When we were both in the plane, we wrapped ourselves up in our coats. I sat down in the pilot's seat, took the key chain out of my pocket and started trying all the keys in the ignition switch.

Vinnie reached down into a paper bag and pulled out a couple of energy bars. He gave me one. It was like eating chocolate-flavoured cardboard. But it was the best-tasting cardboard I'd ever eaten.

When I had finished half of it, I went back to working through the keys with shivering hands, finally finding the right one and turning the whole electric system on. When I flipped on the radio and put on the headset, I heard the beautiful sound of live static. I didn't know what to say, so I just started yelling, 'Mayday! Mayday!'

Vinnie looked out of his window. Then he popped the passenger's side door open. 'What are you doing?' I said, and then I thought I heard something break in the static so I went back to my yelling.

A few seconds later I heard Vinnie shouting to me. He was climbing out on the other float.

'Vinnie, what are you doing?'

I put the headset down and poked my head out of the passenger's side door. Vinnie was down on the float, next to the dummy.

'What is it?' I said.

'Look.'

I saw the blue trousers first. Then the rest of the uniform as Vinnie pulled away the poncho. When he took off the hat, I saw the face.

I was staring into the lifeless eyes of Constable Claude DeMers.

I LEANED BACK against the pilot's seat. As soon as I closed my eyes, I felt dizzy. Bad idea. When I opened them again, the plane had spun round so that we were facing the spot on the shore where we had left Gannon. I could just barely make out his body, lying in the dirt. The plane kept turning slowly, Gannon's body and all the trees moving across our line of sight, the whole world spinning round us.

I picked up the headset again, yelled into the transmitter a few more times, then threw it back down.

'We're too far away,' Vinnie said quietly. He had climbed back in the plane and was in the seat beside me. 'Sitting down on this lake, with these trees, we'll never reach anybody. But at least I got him. At least he'll go down with us.'

'Stop talking like that, Vinnie. Somebody has to know this plane is here. Somebody will be out looking for DeMers. And we've got a rifle now. Hell, we can go shoot that moose.'

'You go ahead,' he said. 'I don't think I can move any more.'

'You rest a while,' I said. 'I'll take care of it. Don't worry.'

Vinnie closed his eyes. I tried to fight it, but my eyelids dropped. I was almost comfortable, except for the way my feet felt, like they

weren't even part of my body. I was starting to feel warm. Just a few minutes with my eyes closed, in this warm, comfortable seat . . .

I stood up and hit my head on the plane's low ceiling. 'Vinnie,' I said. I touched his face. 'Vinnie, you gotta hang in there.'

He didn't move.

I pulled his coat tighter round his neck and climbed back over the rear seats, looking for something else to keep him warm. There was a metal box in the back of the plane. Inside it were a polar fleece blanket and a first-aid kit.

'This is great,' I said. 'We could have used these yesterday.'

I took the blanket back up to Vinnie and wrapped it round him. I was about to break out some bandages, then thought better of it. Let him sleep. In the meantime, I'm gonna go get us some food.

I picked up Gannon's rifle, opened the door and climbed down the ladder to the float. I was just about ready to jump into the cold water when I heard the noise. In the distance, it sounded like . . .

A plane.

My first thought was, here's more horror coming from the skies, another planeload of killers. My second thought was, thank God, it's Guy and Maskwa coming to get us out of here at last.

It was neither.

A blue Cessna finally appeared over the tree line, heading north. I stood there on the float, watching it circle and begin its descent. The pilot had spotted us. There was no way he could have missed us. When the plane was low enough, I saw the official markings of the Ontario Provincial Police. That's when it occurred to me.

Constable DeMers is dead. His body is on the other side of this plane. And I'm holding the rifle that probably killed him.

By the time they hit the water, I had thrown the rifle back into the plane. Vinnie was still out cold. Somebody was leaning out of the window with a megaphone, shouting over the engine noise.

Finally, when the plane was thirty yards away, I could make out what he was saying. 'Did you hear me? I said put your hands in the air! Right now!'

I put my hands up. As the plane drew alongside, it kicked up enough turbulence in the water to make me lose my balance. I grabbed the ladder and listened to the man yelling at me while he climbed out of his plane and tried to jump onto ours. He ended up with one leg on the float and one leg in the water, all the way up to his crotch. It was the constable with the boxer face, one of the men who had shown up when we had found the Suburban in the woods.

'Son of a bitch, that's cold,' he said. I was about to tell him he didn't know anything about how cold the water was, but I held my tongue. I knew the scene was about to go from bad to worse.

'The man on the other float,' I said. 'That's DeMers. He's dead.'

That's when I noticed Reynaud getting out of the plane. 'McKnight, what did you just say?'

It all went to hell in the next few minutes. I kept my mouth shut while the cops piled out of their plane and climbed aboard Gannon's. The other constable we had met, the one with the suntan, was the pilot. Reynaud jumped across first, landing lightly on her feet. She climbed up the ladder and down the other side, making her way out on the far float to her partner's body. I didn't see her reaction. I was too busy cooperating with the other constables, putting my hands behind my back so they could cuff me.

Reynaud came back through the plane, looked at Vinnie, put her hand on his neck to check his pulse, and then came down to me. She looked at me for exactly one second and then backhanded me right across the face.

'I'm sorry about DeMers,' I said. 'But I didn't do it. He was dead when we got here.'

'Who killed him?' Her face was red, and she was rubbing her hand.

'As far as I can tell, Hank Gannon. He's over there on the shoreline. He's dead, too.'

I felt one of the other constables squeezing my shoulder.

'We did kill Gannon. He was trying to shoot us.'

'We saw you with the rifle, McKnight. You threw it back in the plane when we landed.'

I took a deep breath. It was probably a good time to stop talking. That would have been the smart thing. But nobody's ever accused me of being smart. 'Look,' I said, 'we've been up here for two days. Guy Berard and his grandfather flew us up here.'

'I know,' she said.

That stopped me. 'Where are they now?' I said. 'Are they—?'

'They're at home,' she said. 'Why did they fly you out here?'

'It's a long story, OK? We need to get Vinnie back to a doctor. I'll tell you the rest on the way.'

She looked at the two men, then at me. 'My partner is dead. The best cop I've ever known. The best . . . human being. He's dead.'

'So are the other men,' I said. 'Vinnie's brother, Tom. Albright, and the rest of the men who were missing. We found them.'

'What are you talking about? They flew back out on Saturday.'

'No,' I said. 'We found them. A couple of miles north of the cabin.'

She didn't know what to say to that.

'I'll tell you everything I know,' I said. 'Please, we've got to get Vinnie out of here. He's been shot in the face.'

That woke her up. 'Jim, you take these men back. I'll stay here.'

'Natty, you can't do that,' he said.

'I'm not leaving my partner,' she said. Her face was like stone now. 'Get in the air and call for back-up.'

They had to drag Vinnie out of his seat and carry him to the other plane. After all we had been through, he just about drowned right there. They took my handcuffs off, let me jump across, then put the handcuffs back on when I was in my seat.

'Smallest damned lake I've ever taken off from,' the pilot said. He gave it the gas and the plane fought its way up into the air.

As we climbed over the trees, I looked down and saw Reynaud standing there on the float, watching us fly away.

WHEN WE WERE in the air, the pilot called in the basics. Boxer Face sat in the passenger's seat, looking back at me every few minutes. It was hard to read his expression. He was probably thinking twenty different things at once. I was sure one of those things was just how good it would feel to open the door and toss us out of the plane.

We flew for over an hour. They didn't ask me to tell the rest of my story. They were saving that for the ground. I drifted in and out of a trance as we bounced and buzzed our way to a small airport. A true amphibian plane, it could land on tarmac as well as water. When we got out, three OPP cars and an ambulance were waiting for us.

A half-hour later, I was sitting in a bed in the clinic with an IV in one arm and the other arm handcuffed to the bed rail. While the two constables stood watching, a doctor was cutting the laces off my boots with scissors.

'How long were you out there?' he asked.

'Most of two days.'

'Immersion foot,' he said. 'Let's see how bad.'

'What about Vinnie? How's he doing?'

The doctor looked up at the officers. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Someone else is working on him.'

When he finally slipped the boot and sock off, the foot was purple. It looked and felt like some alien thing. 'Not good,' he said. 'We'll have to let it warm up slowly. And then it's just a matter of keeping it dry and elevated.' He went to work on the other boot.

'Can one of you guys go see how Vinnie is doing?' I said.

Neither of them moved.

'Thanks a lot,' I said.

Another man, vaguely familiar to me, came in while the doctor was getting my other boot off. The foot looked just as bad. 'Nice case of trench foot,' he said. 'You're gonna be hurting a long time.'

'Can you tell me about my friend?' I asked.

'They're cleaning out his wound right now. That duct tape probably saved his life. Was that your idea?'

'It's all we had to work with.'

I realised where I had seen him before. He was the detachment commander we had seen at the station, Staff Sergeant Moreland. This was obviously his day off, because he wasn't wearing his uniform.

'You've got to understand something,' I said. 'We didn't kill Constable DeMers.'

'He was three months away from retirement. Did you know that?'

'Yes.'

He took out a tape recorder. 'So start at the beginning.'

That's what I did. I told him everything, from the first time we came up to the lodge, to meeting Guy and his grandfather, flying up to the lake, finding the dead bodies, and then the other plane landing. I told him the whole thing from start to finish, and then I told it to him again, this time with some other men standing around listening. One of them was from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The food came right in the middle of my story. It was turkey and mashed potatoes with gravy. I asked the men to forgive my bad manners as I dug into my own little early Thanksgiving.

When they were all gone, a new constable stayed to watch me. He sat in a chair and never took his eyes off me.

Hours later, when it was dark in the room and the constable had been replaced by yet another, I finally drifted off into a hazy half-sleep. In my head I saw pine trees, and a plane turning slowly in the middle of a lake, and the wide-open eyes of a dead man.

And bears.

THE DOCTOR LOOKED at my feet again in the morning. He told me the colour was a lot better, and asked me how they felt.

'Like hell,' I said. 'They itch like crazy.'

'That's to be expected,' he said.

'Can you tell me how my friend is doing?'

'Not too bad, considering. He did lose part of his right ear.'

'I figured that. Can I see him?'

The doctor looked at the constable who was lucky enough to draw chair duty that morning. 'That's not up to me,' he said.

I ate some more. I lay there in the bed, quietly going insane.

Later, Constable Reynaud walked into the room. She looked like hell. She told the constable on duty that he could leave, and then she unlocked my handcuffs.

'We found the bodies,' she said. 'Right where you said they'd be.'

'And Gannon, I assume?'

'Yes, of course. I could see the body from the plane.'

'I'm sorry about your partner.' I didn't know what else to say.

'I talked to him while I was out there. I promised him I'd find out what really happened.'

'I want to know just as badly as you do,' I said. 'Have they figured out when Albright and Tom and the others were killed?'

'They think about ten days ago. Long before you got there.'

'Yes,' I said. 'That's right.'

'One of the men at the crime scene must have seen your truck go by. Apparently, he mentioned this to Claude, so Claude went up there and saw your truck parked outside the Berards' house.'

'And he must have figured—'

'That you didn't go home like we told you. That you got Guy and his grandfather to fly you up to the lake. The Berards told me what happened, McKnight. They said Claude was so mad at you guys, he wanted to fly out there and kick your asses all the way back to Michigan. He could've had one of the OPP planes fly up there to pick you up. But he didn't. As mad as he was at you guys, he still didn't want to see you charged with felony obstruction. Do you understand what I'm telling you?'

'Yes. I do.'

'He wasn't about to fly out there in Mr Berard's plane, though. Did you know that plane is supposed to be out of service?'

'No.'

'He was told to stop doing fly-in hunts three years ago. He was supposed to get it inspected and recertified before taking it up again. So Claude took Mr Berard's keys and asked them both to sit tight. He said he'd call in on Hank Gannon. His plane was faster, anyway.'

'You didn't know anything about this?'

'I was back at the station. He knew I wouldn't have let him go out there. That's the kind of thing he used to do all the time, McKnight. He used to drive me crazy.' She shook her head, almost smiling. 'I

don't know if I would have made him call an OPP plane in,' she said, 'but I would have made him take me with him.'

'If you had gone,' I said, 'you'd probably be dead now.'

'Gannon wouldn't have got both of us.'

'It really was just him? Nobody else from the lodge was involved?'

'It doesn't look like it. Turns out Helen and the Trembleys weren't even around last Saturday, the day those men supposedly flew back.'

'The Trembleys. That's Ron and Millie, right?'

'Yes. They were all in Timmins that day, buying storage containers, so they could pack everything up and move.'

'So you talked to them,' I said. 'I mean, since yesterday—'

'This was like the last big, stupid thing he could do for somebody before he retired, McKnight. Flying out there like a cowboy, getting you and your friend out of there, saving you from going to jail.'

I closed my eyes.

'The Berards waited around all day yesterday. This morning, when they still hadn't heard anything, they decided to call us. I went up there, got the whole story from them, drove over to the lodge. The plane wasn't there. The whole place was closed up.' She looked out of the window. 'The northeast regional commander himself called me and told me to get over to the airport and help look for him.' She rattled the cuffs around, pulled them tight.

I let the silence hang there for a moment. 'Do you have any idea what this is all about?' I finally said. 'I mean, once it was done, Gannon was afraid of what your partner would find up there. That almost makes sense. But why kill those men in the first place?'

'We don't know, McKnight.'

'This isn't over,' I said. 'We've got to find out what happened.'

She looked at me. 'I'm not going to talk about this any more. You need to go home and get well.'

'I'm free to go?'

'Yes, you are.'

'And Vinnie?'

'Yes.'

'I lost my partner, too,' I said.

She took a moment to think about it. 'When was this?'

'In Detroit, when I was a cop. We were both shot. He died. I didn't. I spent a lot of time blaming myself.'

'So you're saying you know how it feels.'

'Yes.'

'Like hell you do,' she said. And then she left.

AN HOUR LATER I was standing. It felt like somebody had put needles all over the floor, but I was on my feet and slowly walking round the bed when Guy and Maskwa appeared in the doorway. Maskwa came right up to me and grabbed both of my arms.

'Alex,' he said. 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm standing,' I said. 'That's enough. Have you seen Vinnie?'

'Yes. His face—'

'He was very lucky. Although I'm sure he doesn't feel that way.'

Maskwa looked at his grandson, then back at me. 'We are so sorry,' he said. 'We were trying to do the right thing.'

'I know, Maskwa. Nobody could have imagined this.'

'The constable wouldn't let us fly back to get you. He told us he was going to go and get you himself.'

'He may have saved your lives,' I said. 'At least we found Tom. At least we did that much.'

'You are a good friend, Alex. And now Vinnie needs you more than ever. Time will heal his body, but his spirit . . . It is very sick.'

'We'll take care of him,' I said. 'I will, and his family.'

'Good. And if you ever need anything from us, you call us.'

'There is one thing,' I said. I gave him my keys. 'I left my truck at your house.'

He laughed. 'Of course. We'll bring it over.'

While I was waiting for them, I asked the nurse for something to put on my swollen feet. She brought me some slippers that looked like folded-up old newspapers, maybe size fifteen or so. I went padding down the hall until I found Vinnie's room.

He was lying on the bed when I went in. His face was bandaged and his feet were propped up in the air. He was staring at the ceiling.

'Vinnie,' I said. 'Are you all right?'

'Never better.' He looked over at me, then down at my feet. 'Nice slippers.'

If his spirit was sick, like Maskwa had said, I couldn't see it.

He sat up in the bed. 'They told me your feet were twice as bad as mine. We're gonna have to get you some better boots next time.'

'Next time, eh?'

'I promised to buy you a beer,' he said. 'Let's get out of here.'

We found our clothes, signed some papers, and then waited for a prescription for Vinnie. An hour later, we stood by the front door, waiting for Guy and Maskwa. When the truck showed up, we said goodbye to them again. Then we were finally on our way home.

It was hard to feel the pedals under my feet, but I made do.

'Do you think you should call home?' I said.

'The constable called my mother yesterday. She told her I'd be home soon.'

'That was good of her. Especially after what she went through herself yesterday. That reminds me,' I said, picking up the phone and turning it on. 'Remember we had all those messages?' I checked the calls received menu. 'Twenty-seven calls. They just kept calling me.'

'When was the last call?'

'Let's see. Yesterday. Around two o'clock.'

'They must have found out,' he said. 'That guy who called you, didn't he say he was Red Albright's brother?'

'Yeah, he did.'

'So I guess I know how he feels.' He was looking out of the window.

'Yes,' I said. 'I suppose so.'

He didn't say anything. After a while, he fell asleep. I kept driving. Home was eight hours away, down the same roads we had already driven on, through the same trees. It was only a few days before, but now it all felt different. The whole world had changed.

I stopped for gas in Wawa. Vinnie slept on through. I got out and pumped the gas, standing there in my cheap slippers. I shifted my weight back and forth from one burning foot to the other. When I paid the man, he looked at me like I was a mental patient.

The day dragged on. I was tired, but I'd be damned if I was going to stop anywhere short of home. From Wawa we drove south along the shores of Lake Superior, into Soo Canada. We were so close to home now. All we had to do was get over the bridge.

'Oh, horseshit,' I said. 'They're gonna take one look at us and . . .'

I picked up the cellphone, called the OPP station in Hearst and asked if Constable Reynaud was still around.

A minute later, I heard her voice. 'What is it, McKnight?'

'We're coming up to the bridge. Any chance you could call ahead and clear the way for us?'

'You're all the way down there already? You shouldn't have driven so far in your condition. It's not safe.'

'I would have thought you'd be happy to get us out of the country.'

'Don't get cute with me, McKnight. All right?'

'I'm sorry. We just want to get home.'

'I'll call right now,' she said. 'I'll tell them to expect two men who look like shit.'

'That sounds about right,' I said.

She hung up.

I rolled through town and onto the International Bridge. Vinnie woke up briefly and looked out at the water. 'The bridge,' he said.

'Don't worry, they know we're coming.'

When we pulled into the American customs booth, the man had obviously got the message. He looked us both over and whistled.

The sun was going down when we hit Michigan soil and headed for Paradise. Drop Vinnie off at his house, I thought. Get him inside, make sure he's comfortable. Then go home and go to bed. And sleep for at least three days.

It was dark when we finally reached Paradise. As I pulled onto our access road, I was blinded by a pair of headlights.

'Who the hell?' I couldn't imagine who was on their way out. I stopped the truck and opened my door. It was a long, black sedan. I didn't recognise it. Two men got out. They had guns in their hands.

They were on top of us before I could do a thing. No time to back up, no time to get out and run—not that we would have been able to run, anyway.

'Out of the truck,' the one man said. He wore a leather jacket and was thick in the neck and shoulders, like a nightclub bouncer. He spoke in a matter-of-fact way, the way you'd tell a mover where to put the furniture. 'Nice and easy,' he said as I got out. He gave me a quick pat-down and turned me round to face the other man across the bed of my truck. The scene was side-lit by the glare of the headlights.

The guy on Vinnie's side looked a little more serious. And now I knew. He had my cellphone number. With a little work, you could find out my address. He had a big nose, but with all the advance publicity, I would have expected something even bigger. Here he was. Red's brother. He had a leather jacket on, too—probably a size L to my man's XXL. He was holding his gun right to Vinnie's temple.

'Which one of you is McKnight?' he asked.

'I am,' I said.

'And you're the Indian?' He pulled Vinnie's head back by the hair.

Vinnie didn't flinch. 'Yes.'

'Why did you call Red?'

'We were looking for my brother,' Vinnie said. 'Red hired him as a guide.'

'Yeah, I know that.'

'Then what do you want from us?'

Easy, Vinnie. I tried to catch his eye.

'What I want from you, you stupid Indian, is the whole story. 'What the fuck happened up there?'

'We don't know,' Vinnie said. 'We know a man named Gannon was involved. That's all.'

'No. No, that's not good enough. You hear me? My brother is dead. And I want to know why.'

'So do I.' Vinnie's voice was even, his eyes clear.

'We found him,' I said. 'We found your brother.'

He looked over the truck bed at me. 'Where?'

'In the woods. Where Gannon had buried him with the others.'

He took a few hard breaths. 'You found Red?'

'That man you're holding on to, Gannon shot him. He blew part of his ear right off. And you wanna know what this man did to Gannon? To the man who killed your brother?'

'Yes, I wanna hear it.'

'He took a long, heavy stick,' I said, 'and he sharpened it, and while Gannon was shooting at me, Vinnie came up behind him and ran that stick through his back. If he had got him in the heart, he would have died almost immediately, but that's not the way it happened. It took him a long time to die.'

'Did he say anything to you?'

'He tried to say something, but he was choking on his own blood.'

There were tears in the man's eyes. He looked at Vinnie. 'You're telling me this man killed the man who killed my brother.'

'Yes,' I said. 'He did it for his brother. And for your brother. And the other men.'

The man let go of Vinnie. He shook his head. 'Is that it?' he said. 'What was this guy's name again?'

'Gannon. Hank Gannon.'

'He did all this by himself?'

'We don't know that,' I said. I figured, what the hell, go ahead and push your luck. 'Maybe you can help us figure it out.'

The man looked me in the eye. 'What do you mean?'

'We're just wondering. If somebody else was involved, maybe it was one of the other men in the hunting party. Or at least somebody else that you'd know about.'

The sudden look on his face told me I'd pushed it too far.

'Never mind,' I said. 'We want answers as much as you do.'

He stood there for a long time, breathing hard and shaking his head. 'I was supposed to be up there,' he said finally, putting the gun back in his jacket. 'Those guys never go hunting without me.'

It made sense. That's why there were five men instead of six.

'I hope you guys understand why we're here,' he said. 'I've been

going crazy. I just had to do something, you know what I mean?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I understand.'

'We drove all the way up there,' he said. 'And then all the way home. And then when we heard . . . we drove all the way here. We waited around for you.' He looked down at Vinnie's feet. 'What's with the slippers?'

'It's a long story,' I said.

'Yeah, well, we got some things to do now. We gotta go talk to some people. Let's get out of here, Jay . . .'

They went back to their car.

'Hey,' he said, standing in the glare of the headlights. His voice caught as he asked us his final questions. 'Is it true what they said? Did my brother really get set on fire up there?'

'Yes,' I said. 'They were burned.'

He stood there for a long moment, looking up at the sky.

The big guy spoke up again. 'They were burned, Dal.'

'Yeah, I heard the man.'

'I'm just saying—'

'That's enough. Let's go.'

They got in the car and drove off.

'Are you all right?' I said, as I watched the taillights disappear.

Vinnie stood there holding on to the side of the truck. 'Yeah, I'm just fine,' he said. 'That was actually a good warm-up.'

'How's that?'

'Tomorrow will be worse,' he said. 'That's when I face my family.'

SEVEN

When I woke up, it was snowing. It was a light October flurry, nothing to get the snowplough out for. The clock said 12.34. I figured I'd been sleeping for about fourteen hours. My feet hurt when I put them on the cold floor. I took a long hot shower, shaved six days of beard off my face, and got dressed.

I fired up the truck and drove down my road. I noticed that Vinnie's truck was gone. He must have been over at his mother's house. For a second I thought I should go over there myself, but then something told me I should leave them alone for one day, at least.

I went down to the Glasgow Inn. Jackie looked me over like I was

the walking dead and made me a cheese omelette with five eggs. He served it to me with a cold Canadian Molson as I put my feet up by the fire. If he had asked me for everything I owned, I would have given it to him right then.

'Are you gonna tell me what happened?' he asked as he sat down next to me.

I spent the next hour going through the whole story for him. It felt good to tell him, like maybe I was almost ready to let go of it. Almost. When I was done, he got me another Canadian and I fell asleep in front of the fire.

When I went back home, I still didn't see Vinnie's truck in his driveway, but there was a note from him pinned on my door. *Service for Tom: 1 p.m. tomorrow. See you there.*

I drove down to the end of my road. The blue tarp was still tied tight over the walls we had started. I can't believe it, I said to myself. I actually started building this cabin. In October. That's how crazy I was. I checked the other cabins on the way back. Two were still occupied, two were empty. The empty cabins were spotless and money had been left in envelopes. Bow hunters, I thought. God bless them.

I went back down to the Glasgow for dinner that evening. As I ate sitting by the fire again, I couldn't help thinking about it all. Again. Five men dead, a vehicle moved several miles. Somebody else had to help Gannon do this. But who?

And those men from last night, the big man, Jay, and Red's brother—what was his name? Dal, he called him. I replayed the whole scene in my mind, word for word.

Those men knew something. At least they had an idea. If anyone could lead us to the answers, it was these two men.

So rest up, Vinnie. We've got some work to do.

I WENT TO BED early that night, and slept in again the next morning. I almost felt human. I put on my old black suit, spent a few minutes tying my tie, and then drove down past Vinnie's house. He wasn't there, so I headed over to the reservation. There were a lot of cars at the tribal centre, so I knew I was in the right place.

When I went inside, I saw that everyone had gathered in the main hall. There had to be a couple of hundred people there. The room itself was simple, with a high ceiling and drawings of animals and mountains and trees, along with the Bay Mills crest of four feathers. A great fireplace stood in the centre of the room. The fire was going strong and the sweet smell of burning tobacco hung in the air.

Vinnie came to me and took my right hand. His face was still taped up. 'Alex,' he said. 'You look a lot better.'

'So do you,' I said, although it felt like a lie. He still looked totally worn out, even worse now than before.

He took me to his mother, the moment I had been dreading. But she took my face in both hands and kissed me. 'Thank you,' she said. Her face was red with grief. 'Thank you for everything you've done.'

I didn't have any words for her. I took her hands and held them.

'You're my son now,' she said. 'You are my son.'

I shook hands with the rest of Vinnie's family. I couldn't help wondering how they could be having this funeral without Tom's body, which was probably in some forensics lab in Canada. Then I found out. A traditional Ojibwa funeral lasts for days. You go, you spend time with the family, you offer tobacco in the fireplace, you eat, you go home. And then you come back the next day.

A man stood up to speak. The room went silent as he talked about what a man must do to live in peace, and how when a man's time on this earth is over, he must follow the setting sun to the west, crossing over the Path of Souls to the Land of Souls. It made me think of what Mrs LeBlanc had said about Tom's Ojibwa name—how being named for the western sky was a bad omen. It turned out she was right.

I ate with the family, sitting at the long table with cousins, aunts and uncles all around me. After the dinner I said goodbye to Vinnie and his family. Vinnie followed me outside into the cold night air.

'I appreciate you coming,' he said.

'Least I could do, Vinnie.'

'I'm sure my mother would appreciate it if you stopped by again.'

'I will,' I said. 'And we've got some other things to talk about.'

'I can't even think right now, Alex. Give me some time, OK?'

'OK.' Then I said good night and went home to bed.

WHEN I STOPPED at Jackie's the next morning, he asked me where I had been the night before. I told him about the funeral, how it would go on for days. He told me to wait while he went upstairs to put his suit on. He put a sign on the front door—*Gone to a funeral*—and then he came with me to meet Vinnie's family.

Some people stood up after dinner and told stories about Tom, about all the funny things he had done, about all the times he had gone out of his way to help somebody. Vinnie didn't look so good and I knew I would have to wait before I could talk to him about the men from Detroit.

On the third day of the funeral, I went around dinnertime again and heard some more stories about Tom. Vinnie looked even worse than the day before. I went home, wondering what in the world I could do for him. Maskwa was right. His spirit was sick.

On the fourth day, Vinnie collapsed. I picked him up off the floor, with some help from his cousins. We sat him down, fanned him, and tried to make him drink some water. Like a prize fighter, he tried to shake us off and get back on his feet.

'I'm all right, guys,' he said. 'I just blacked out for a second.'

On the fifth day, Tom's remains finally arrived from Canada. The funeral moved to the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a Catholic church located on the reservation. They did a Catholic funeral Mass and then drove Tom's coffin up to the top of Mission Hill, where they buried him in the reservation's graveyard, facing west.

When they were done, Vinnie went off by himself and looked out over the cliff. I went and joined him and looked down at Spectacle Lake and the new golf course, at all the pine and birch trees and Waishkey Bay and beyond that the heart of Lake Superior.

'It's a nice view,' I said. 'It's a good place to end up.' I felt stupid as soon as I said it, but Vinnie turned to me and gave me a weak smile.

'It's a good place,' he said.

'Your mother told me I'm her son now,' I said. 'Does that mean we're brothers?'

'Of course it does.'

'I never got to ask you,' I said. 'What does that word mean? The one you called me at the lodge when we were stuck in the mud. You said my Ojibwa name would be Mada-something.'

He smiled. 'Madawayash. It means "chattering wind".'

'Good thing you're my brother now or I'd have to smack you.'

'If you're my brother, that means you have to come to the sweat with me.'

'A sweat? Is that part of the funeral?'

'No, it's something they're doing for me,' he said. 'It'll be good for you, too.'

'I've been wanting to talk to you about some things I've been thinking about,' I said. 'About Red's brother and that other guy, and some of the things they said. I promised myself I'd wait until you felt better but I don't want the trail to get cold. You know what I mean?'

'I don't want you to do this, Alex. Tom is gone. We can't change that.'

It took a moment for it to sink in. 'Vinnie,' I said, 'are we going to find out what really happened, or not?'

'Come on,' he said. 'We'll talk about it later.' He turned to go.

'Vinnie—'

'Later, Alex. I promise.'

I watched him get into one of the cars. I stood for a while, breathing in the cold air, and then I went to my truck and followed them.

We ended up over at the home of his cousin Buck, who had built a little sweat lodge in the back yard. It was a half-sphere, about ten feet in diameter, made by lashing saplings together and covering them with canvas and old rugs. The men already had a fire going, several yards from the lodge. They were heating stones in the fire, and then moving them into the lodge with a long shovel.

There were eleven men, counting me. The others stripped down to their underwear. They waited patiently until everyone was standing there together, these mostly naked men of all ages, with long dark hair over their shoulders. I couldn't imagine doing the same on a day like this, but I figured what the hell.

I almost choked on the steam when I went into the lodge, but it was warm and made every muscle in my body go loose. There was a faint light from the sparks and from the glowing stones in the centre pit. I felt my way over to the edge and sat down with the other men, closing my eyes and letting the steam fill my lungs. Someone dipped a large ladle into a bucket of water and poured it on the stones. Then he added some sage. One of the four medicines, that much I knew. I sat there hoping that the medicine would work and that it would make Vinnie start feeling like himself again.

We sat in the lodge for at least an hour. It was better than any sauna I had ever been in. The sweat rolled down over my face, as if every poison in my body and every bad thought in my mind were being drawn out by the heat. Nobody said a word.

Finally, one man opened a flap and we all crawled out. The air felt as cold as the water had been in that lake, but I didn't shiver. Instead I felt a tingling all over my body. I put my clothes back on, moving in slow motion. When I was dressed, I looked around for Vinnie, but he was still in the lodge, fast asleep.

I helped a couple of his cousins carry him out of the lodge and into one of the cars. He didn't wake up, and we didn't bother dressing him. We just wrapped him up in blankets.

'Just take him to his house,' I said. 'I'll take care of him.'

'We'll take him home,' Buck said.

'Good, I'll follow you.'

'No,' he said. 'I mean we'll take him to the reservation.' He and the

other cousins were looking at me. Between one moment and the next, my welcome among them had ended. 'Thank you for everything you did,' Buck said. 'We'll take care of Vinnie now.'

Thank you, he says. The man says thank you and they'll take care of him now. I had a sudden urge to fight them, all of them at once.

'He's my brother now. You understand? You're not going to come between us.'

Buck didn't move.

There was nothing else to do. I shook my head and left.

I headed back home, tired and used up. Finally, I pulled off the road. I sat there for five or six minutes, the wind whistling past the windows. I thought about how good it would feel to go and sit by the fire at Jackie's place. Put your feet up and forget all about it.

Then I turned the truck round and went back the way I came.

If I was going to do something stupid, I couldn't do it alone. And if Vinnie couldn't help me, there was only one other choice.

It was time to talk to my old partner.

I FOUND LEON PRUDELL at the big motor-sports showroom in Sault Ste Marie, pointing out the features of an Arctic Cat to a prospective buyer and his young son. 'This is a hell of a sled,' I heard him say. I knew that's what the real riders called them. They're sleds, not snowmobiles. When he spotted me, he switched off the sales pitch. 'Excuse me,' he said, and then he came over and shook my hand.

'Leon,' I said. He was the same old Leon, 240 pounds of nervous energy and wild orange hair—the Leon who had talked me into becoming his silent partner in the short-lived Prudell-McKnight Investigations. It didn't work out. Sault Ste Marie just isn't the right market for a private investigator, especially when everybody in town remembers you as the goofy fat kid in the back of the class.

'Alex, my God. Are you all right?'

'You must have heard—'

'Of course I did. You were in the paper. You and Vinnie. I'm sorry I didn't get out to the funeral.'

'Don't worry about that,' I said. 'Listen, I hate to bother you, but I don't know who else to ask. I'm trying to find some things out.'

'Oh yeah?' The way he said it, the way his eyes came alive, I knew I had him hooked. It made me feel worse.

'I'm sorry, Leon. It's just—'

'I'm almost done here, all right? You hang tight for a few minutes. We'll go somewhere and talk.'

When he turned round, the man and his son had disappeared.

'I blew your sale,' I said.

'Nah, they weren't buying. Come on, let's get out of here.'

He went into the back for a moment. I heard him talking to somebody and then he came out again. 'Where do you want to go?'

'You still have your computer at your house? I just wanted to look up a couple of names.'

'Say no more,' he said. 'I'll drive. Just leave your truck here.'

'But then you gotta bring me back.'

'It's all right, Alex. Come on. You can brief me in the car.'

He opened the car door for me and then got into the driver's seat. It was the same old red Chevy Nova he'd had for ever.

'It's good to see you,' I said. 'Everybody at home OK?'

'Yeah, Eleanor's a lot happier,' he said as he pulled out of the parking lot. 'Now that things have settled down a little bit.' Settled down meaning he didn't have his little office in town any more, and he wasn't buying any more high-tech listening devices. 'So tell me what's going on,' he said.

'All right,' I said. 'Here's the deal.' I ran through the whole story again, just as I had done for Jackie. 'The funny thing is,' I said, 'every time I say that name, Red Albright, it gets more familiar to me. I'm starting to think I've heard it before, somewhere.'

'Well, you said he lives in Detroit, right? You were a police officer down there, when?'

'For eight years. Up until 1984.'

'Do you think you ran into him when you were on the force?'

'It's possible,' I said. 'I can't remember.'

'Well, we'll work on that name. I still have access to my data bases.'

'Doesn't that stuff cost you money?'

He hesitated. 'Yeah, a little bit.'

When we got to his house, I gave his wife Eleanor a hug. She was still just as big as her husband, and she still looked strong enough to bench-press me. Happy as she was to see me, there was something else in her eyes as she looked at me. She had always humoured Leon with his private-eye dreams, until they almost got him killed. His old partner Alex was probably not the most welcome sight.

'I'm helping him with something,' Leon said. 'We're just gonna look somebody up.'

She gave us a weak smile. Leon took me into the guest room. He had his computer in there. 'Have a seat,' he said. 'We'll get this thing going. Tell me the name of the individual in question.'

'The man's name is Red Albright,' I said.

'I'll try a P-search,' he said. 'It's a standard person search, using most of the public data bases. I'll try all of Michigan,' he said.

A few seconds later, he had a hit to show me. 'Here's a Red Albright in Port Huron.'

'No, that can't be it,' I said. 'I mean, Red is probably a nickname. How about trying his brother? His name is Dal.'

'Probably short for something too,' Leon said. 'But that's OK. We'll look for any first name that begins with those letters.'

He typed that in and waited a few seconds. A few names came back. 'Here's one,' he said. 'Dallas Albright, in Grosse Pointe.'

'That's gotta be him,' I said. 'What can we find out about him?'

Leon smiled at me. 'What about his whole life? Employment history, court records . . . It's all out there, Alex.'

Within the next hour, we had found out that Dallas Albright was a part owner of Albright Enterprises in Detroit, and that one of the other owners was named Roland Albright. We assumed Roland was Red. We found his home address, too, and an address for Albright Enterprises. The one thing we didn't find was any mention of either man in the criminal justice system. They were both clean.

We tried Hank Gannon, too. There was nothing to find, outside of his off-season address in Sudbury and his pilot's certification.

'I've got a friend over at the newspaper,' Leon said. 'He'll run a LexisNexis on them if I ask real nice.'

'That's the one that searches the newspapers, all over the country?'

'Yeah, it goes back about twenty years.'

'This is really great, Leon. I don't know how to thank you.'

That sparkle in his eyes faded away as he stood up. 'Yeah, well . . .' he said, looking down at his computer. 'It's no problem.'

'You miss it, don't you?'

'It was nothing but trouble.'

'You're good at it,' I said. 'Better than I ever was.' I looked out of his window. The sun had gone down. 'I should get out of here,' I said.

'Let's take you back to your truck.'

I gave Eleanor another hug on the way out. The two kids were sitting at the kitchen table, doing homework. They gave me the same look their mother had given me.

'I'm just gonna run Alex back,' Leon said.

Nobody in the room was buying it.

'I'm sorry,' I said, as we got into his car. 'I shouldn't be putting you through this,' I said. 'Or your family. This was a mistake.'

'They'll be all right. When I get back, they'll see it was no big deal.'

He drove out to the empty highway and headed north, back to the motor showroom. 'You know, I've been thinking,' he said. 'You say Vinnie's brother was on parole.'

'Yeah?'

'I'm not trying to convince you he was getting in trouble again, but you've got a convicted drug offender, some men with money and a bush pilot. Doesn't that sort of add up to something?'

'Of course it does. If I didn't know anything about Tom, I'd say the combination looks pretty bad.'

He kept driving. 'Just watch yourself, OK?' he said after a while. 'I don't have to tell you, these might be some pretty bad people.'

'I know.'

'Is your gun loaded?'

'I don't have one any more,' I said. 'I don't need a gun.'

'Whatever you say,' Leon said.

I looked at him. 'Don't do it,' I said. 'Don't get me a gun.'

'Who said I was going to get you a gun? Obtaining a handgun for someone else is illegal in Michigan.'

A few minutes later, Leon dropped me off at my truck. I thanked him again and sent him on his way. On the way home I stopped in at the Glasgow and had a late dinner, then I went back to my cabin.

Since coming home, this was the first night sleep didn't come easy.

THE NEXT MORNING, I decided to give Constable Reynaud a call at the Hearst OPP detachment. The static on the line made it sound like she was on the moon. 'McKnight? What's the matter?'

'I just wanted to ask you something,' I said. 'Tom's body came home yesterday. I assume that means you're done with the forensics.'

'Is there a question in there?'

'Constable, please. May I call you Natalie?'

'I'd rather you didn't.'

I held the phone away from my mouth and counted to three.

'Look,' I finally said. 'Have you ever been to an Ojibwa funeral?'

'No, I haven't.'

'It lasts four or five days. So I've had all that time to think about it. Isn't there anything you can tell me?'

'McKnight, I suppose there's one thing you might want to know. This is something you can share with the family, when the time is right. Tom was shot first. He wasn't alive when they set him on fire.'

'What about the others?'

'The others weren't so lucky.'
'He must have struggled,' I said. 'They had to shoot him.'
'Is there anything else?'
'Do you have any more information on why this happened?'
'I can't say, OK? I will tell you that we're not close to anything.'
'And how are you doing?' I said.
'I'm just fine, McKnight. You don't have to ask.'
'I told you before, I've been there. I know how it is.'
'Yeah, you told me. Thank you. Now if that's all . . .'
'Nobody's looking you in the eye, are they?' I said.
She didn't say anything. More static, humming on the line.
'Your partner was killed,' I said. 'Nobody is gonna come right out and say they blame you.'
'Is this supposed to be helping me, McKnight?'
'There's nobody else you can talk to about this, OK? Trust me, nobody else is gonna understand what you're going through.'
'Well, if it gets to be too much for me, I'll give you a call. My own personal psychiatrist.'
'Constable, come on. I'm just trying to—'
The phone went dead.
'Well, that was brilliant,' I said. 'I'm such a big help.'
I tried to forget about it, but it put me in a bad mood that lasted the rest of the day. I didn't even go down to the Glasgow. As if I didn't have enough problems—whether I wanted to admit it to myself or not—Natalie Reynaud had got under my skin.

ANOTHER DAY PASSED. Vinnie was still with his family. I thought about going over to the reservation and finding him. But I didn't.
Leon finally called me back. His friend at the paper had run Hank Gannon and the Albright brothers through LexisNexis. 'He got nothing at all on Gannon,' Leon said. 'On the Albrights, he found a few things. Some civic awards, something else about a car dealership Red had owned for a while, then sold. Oh, and a ballpark they both rededicated. I guess it was named after their father.'
'Albright Field,' I said. 'Of course. That's where I've heard that name before. It was over on the east side.'
'It sounds like an old Detroit family with a little bit of money,' he said. 'Nothing out of the ordinary.'
'I don't know, Leon. Dallas and one of his buddies came all the way up here to stick guns in our faces. Does that sound like an ordinary businessman to you?'

'Maybe he's done a real good job keeping his name clean,' he said. 'Either that or he just went a little crazy.'

'Who knows, Leon? I don't think we're getting anywhere, but thanks for everything, partner.'

I hung up the phone and headed down to the Glasgow. After having to fight so hard in the woods, I couldn't just sit still now and relax. A couple of hours with Jackie and I'd be myself again. I passed Vinnie's empty cabin yét again. It looked small and lonely. I never had a brother before. That's what I thought as I drove by. I never knew what it felt like.

It was Sunday afternoon, so that meant football games on the television above the bar. We sat and watched the Lions find another way to lose a game. I finally read the newspaper Jackie had saved for me. The story had made the AP wire—five bodies found on a remote fly-in lake in the wilds of northern Canada. A constable from the Ontario Provincial Police dead on the scene. The apparent killer also dead, with two men from Michigan the sole survivors. It surprised me that nobody had called me, looking for the inside story.

'How's Vinnie doing?' Jackie asked.

'I'm not sure. He's with his family.'

'They're taking care of him and you're feeling left out. Am I right?'

'There's more to it than that.'

'Yeah, I bet. Why don't you just go over there and find out how he's doing? Instead of moping around here, making me miserable.'

Deep down, I knew he was right. So what the hell, I thought. I'm going over there. I drove down to the reservation, taking Lakeshore Road round the bay. The wind was kicking up, and by the time I got to the reservation the snowflakes were flying through the air like tiny bullets. I pulled up in front of Vinnie's mother's house.

Vinnie's truck wasn't there.

I got out of my truck and rang the doorbell. Mrs LeBlanc opened the door. She looked like she had aged twenty years.

'Alex,' she said, letting me in.

'I was just stopping by,' I said. 'I wanted to see how Vinnie was doing. But it looks like he went home.'

She frowned. 'Vinnie went home three days ago,' she said. 'He went home the day after we buried Tom.'

'That can't be,' I said. 'His truck's not there. You mean you haven't even heard from him?'

She shook her head. 'We just thought he needed some time to himself. You know how he is. He's always been that way.'

I stood there watching a dark cloud pass over her face, this woman who had already been through so much.

'Mrs LeBlanc, I'm sure you're right. You know what? I bet he's at the casino. He's either back on the job, or maybe he just got a room for a couple of days. I'll go check on him, OK?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Please check, Alex. Will you call me?'

'Of course I will. You just relax.'

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and left. When I was back in my truck I fired it up and pulled out hard, ready to bury the accelerator. I drove over to the Bay Mills Casino and looked for Vinnie's truck in the parking lot. It wasn't there. I gunned it down Three Mile Road into Sault Ste Marie and checked out the casino there. It had a much bigger lot, so it took me a few minutes to cover the whole thing. There was no sign of Vinnie's truck.

I didn't think I'd find him at a bar. But I couldn't help taking a look through the couple of parking lots I passed on my way back to the reservation.

I was running out of ideas and it was getting dark. Maybe he was up on Mission Hill, I thought, sitting next to his brother's grave. At this point, it was about all I had left.

It was a steep climb up that road. I put the truck into low gear and ground my way up, swearing at the wind. When I got to the top, I couldn't see Vinnie's truck. It was just an empty graveyard and the overlook. I was about to turn round when something came back to me. A memory of Vinnie looking out over the cliff the day he buried his brother, that beautiful view where you could see for ever.

And then another memory, something he had said to me when he was telling me the story about Tom trying to hang himself: 'If you're gonna kill yourself, you go up to the old graveyard on Mission Hill, you say hello to your ancestors and then you jump off the cliff. Just walk right out into the sky. That's how you kill yourself.'

That's what he said.

I parked the truck. I got out and walked over to the edge of the overlook. It was too dark to see. I couldn't tell if Vinnie's body was lying down there in a broken heap. My friend. My brother.

'Goddamn it,' I said. 'You didn't do it. I know you didn't.'

The wind caught me. It almost took me right over.

'How could I even think it? There's no way, Vinnie. I know you're not down there.'

I looked out at the few lights scattered along the shoreline.

'So where the hell are you?'

I HAD A TOUGH CALL to make. The last thing I wanted to do was get Mrs LeBlanc even more worried than she already was, but if I was going to figure out where Vinnie was, I'd have to start with her.

She looked surprised when I showed up on her doorstep again. 'Alex?' she said as she let me back in. 'You found him already?'

'No,' I said. 'Mrs LeBlanc, I have to talk to you.'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. I think Vinnie went somewhere to be by himself for a while. I'm sure he's OK.' It sounded reasonable. Hell, for all I knew, it was the truth.

When she let me in the house, I saw Buck sitting at the kitchen table. He stood up and came into the front room.

I looked him in the eye. 'You said you were gonna take care of him.'

'You can blame me for this later,' he said. 'Right now we've got to find him. You got any ideas?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Does Vinnie know anybody in Detroit?'

'Why would he go down there?'

'There are a couple of men there. They might know something.'

He thought about it. 'There's the casino. A lot of Sault members go down there to work.'

Of course. Detroit had three casinos, and one of them was partially owned by the Sault tribe. There was a busload of Sault Ojibwas going down to Detroit every week.

'Can you find out if he contacted any of them, and let me know if you get anything?'

'Yes, Alex. Give me your number.'

I wrote down my cellphone number for him.

'I'm gonna go do that now,' he said. 'I'll call you.' He put one big hand on Mrs LeBlanc's shoulder, then he stepped in front of me, hesitating for one instant, and opened the door.

Mrs LeBlanc watched him go out into the night. Then she looked up at me. 'I don't understand any of this.'

'Please don't worry,' I said. 'I'll find him. I promise.'

She looked back out of the door. A car rumbled by. It was Buck on his way home to make phone calls.

'His cabin,' I said, an idea coming to me. 'Do you have a key?'

She nodded her head, turned and went down the hallway. A minute later, she came back with the key.

'Here,' she said. 'I've never given it to anyone before.'

'Thank you, Mrs LeBlanc.' I kissed her on the cheek and left. For the second time that month, I went out to find one of her sons.

DETROIT. I SAID IT over and over in my mind as I drove back to Paradise. It was once my home town, at least in the sense that I lived right next to it and grew up rooting for the Tigers and Lions and Pistons and Red Wings. Later, I worked in Detroit as a police officer. Eight years of my life. I knew the city inside and out.

There is crime in Detroit. There is crime in Detroit like there are fountains in Paris, or canals in Venice. People all over the world know this about Detroit. It might not be fair to think that way. You can look at the art museum and the new ballpark and believe it's all part of the Detroit Renaissance, and maybe you'd be right. You can even love the place like I do. But it's still Detroit, and always will be.

That's where Albright came from, Red and his men, driving twelve hours due north to go hunting for moose, or whatever they were doing. That's where his brother came from, days later, driving up the same way, looking for some answers. The way it sounded, he went right back home thinking maybe the answers were all down there, that he didn't have to leave town to find out the real story.

Now that Vinnie had buried his brother, it looked like he had gone down there, too. If he was looking for his own answers, it was the best place to start.

And also the worst place.

Which reminded me—I already had Dallas Albright's address and phone number, courtesy of Leon and his computer. They were right here in the truck, in the manila folder Leon had given me. While I circled round Whitefish Bay, I pulled out the piece of paper and dialled the number. I got a recorded voice telling me the party was not available and I could leave a message. I hung up.

I turned onto the access road, and then into Vinnie's driveway. I kept the headlights on for a moment, got out and looked at the ground. I would have had to see it in the daylight to be sure, but it looked like Vinnie had driven his truck round the side of his cabin.

Goddamn you, Vinnie. You didn't even want me to know you were here? Wherever you are, you better be in one piece, so I can personally kick your ass all the way home.

I turned the truck off and used the key to open his front door, hoping to find something that would let me know what he was up to.

I picked up Vinnie's phone and hit the redial button to find out where his last call had gone. I got another recording. This time it was the archive and reprints department of the *Detroit News*. Their regular business hours were 8.30 to 4.30, and I needed to either call back then or leave a message.

I kept looking around his cabin. It was a great-looking place, small but perfectly put together. The bed was made, one of his mother's quilts folded tight on top. The wood stove looked as clean as a rifle barrel, and a copper kettle gleamed on the cooking plate.

This is why he moved off the reservation, I thought. This is why he left all that heat and noise behind, even if it was happy heat and noise. This is how he wanted to live—straight and sober and clean, and alone—with everything in its place.

The one thing that surprised me was the computer on his desk. I didn't even know he had one. I knew it was my best hope. I also knew there was no way I could make it talk to me.

It was 8.30 at night. I pictured Leon putting his kids to bed. The phone ringing, and Leon telling Eleanor he had to go out again, to go and help Alex with one more thing. The look on her face.

I picked up the phone and dialled the number.

Leon told me he'd be right over. Just like I knew he would.

While I waited I kept poking around the place. I found a piece of crumpled-up paper in the wastepaper basket. When I smoothed it out it told me that Vinnie had received a fax from the *Detroit News*. It was just the cover sheet. Whatever the *News* had faxed him, he had apparently taken it with him.

Leon showed up about twenty minutes later. 'This is a nice place,' he said, looking around the cabin. 'What have you found so far?'

'Just one thing,' I said. I told him about the redial and showed him the paper I had found.

Leon read the cover sheet and ran his free hand through his orange hair. 'He found something in the newspapers. Maybe he looked further back. Beyond what LexisNexis could find. You think he went to Detroit to find out what really happened?'

'And why it happened,' I said. 'And who else might still be around who Vinnie could blame for it. It's not a good state of mind to be in, all by himself down there. He's gonna do something crazy.'

'Let's try his computer,' Leon said. 'See if that tells us anything.'

He turned it on. While he waited for it to come up, he looked at Vinnie's printer. 'It's an all-in-one with a fax machine. Very nice,' he said. 'I can't log on to his ISP, but let's see . . . Yeah, I can log myself on as a guest. Maybe I can follow his tracks.'

'You're kinda losing me, Leon. But go ahead.'

'I'll bring up the browser,' he said. 'See, if I click right here, it shows the last few websites he went to.'

'I see the *Detroit News* there,' I said. 'What are those other things?'

'Ah, just general stuff. Yahoo and Amazon, and something for the casino, it looks like. A real hacker could get into his actual history file but I can only do the basics. I'm sorry, Alex.'

'Don't be sorry. I dragged you all the way over here.'

'Let me try one more thing,' he said. 'I can search on every file that's either new or changed in the last couple of days.'

While I waited, I picked up a pot holder decorated with the four Ojibwa colours. Yellow, red, black and white. They represented the four points of the compass, the four races of man, the four medicines, the four seasons. I knew Mrs LeBlanc had made this for Vinnie.

'Wait a minute, what's this?'

'What is it, Leon?'

'It's a map program. You know, you give them an address and it draws you a map with driving directions.'

'Can you tell what addresses he looked up?'

'No. But maybe if I go to the website itself.' He typed in the name and waited till he was in the site. 'Now, if this lets you recall the last few addresses . . .' He clicked a button. 'We got a couple here.'

'Don't tell me,' I said. 'They're in Detroit.'

'No,' Leon said. 'They're not in Detroit.'

That stopped me cold. 'Where are they?'

'They're in Canada,' he said. 'In Sudbury, Ontario. Do you know who lives there?'

'Yeah,' I said, looking over Leon's shoulder. Two addresses. Three people. 'Yeah, I do. What about the phone numbers? Are they listed?'

'No, just the addresses, with the maps,' Leon said. 'Who are we talking about, anyway? I can look them up.'

'Helen St Jean,' I said. 'If it's Sudbury, that's got to be one of the addresses. The other is Ron and Millie something.' I thought hard, trying to remember their last name.

'I'll try St Jean.' He went to another website and typed in the name.

'Trembley,' I said. 'Ron and Millie Trembley.'

'I'm not getting anything on Helen St Jean,' he said. 'Though it's not unusual for a single woman to be unlisted. I'll try Trembley.'

'I don't get it,' I said. 'Why would he go up there to see them?'

'Those were the other people at the lodge, right?'

'Right.'

'I'm not getting the Trembleys' phone number, either,' he said. 'I can get them, but I'll have to go home and use my data base. We'll stop there on the way.'

'What are you talking about?'

'We're going to Sudbury, aren't we?'

'Leon, if I take you to Canada in the middle of the night, your wife will have my head on a stick. And, anyway, I'm just gonna find Vinnie and bring him home.'

'If it's that simple, why don't you just go in the morning?'

'Maybe I will,' I said. I didn't want to tell him how worried I was or how much I wished I was already on the road.

'You're a terrible liar, Alex. Just get going. I'll go home and find the phone numbers and call you on your cellphone.'

'Thanks, Leon. Once again.'

He gave me the two maps he had printed out, and sent me on my way. He drove home and I headed straight for the bridge. It was after ten when I reached Canada. The man in customs asked me the standard questions about drugs or firearms in the vehicle. I answered no to both. He gave me a quick once-over and told me to drive safely.

I took the Queen's Highway east this time, instead of north. It ran through downtown Sault Ste Marie, then out along the shore of the North Channel. Leon rang just after eleven with the numbers. I wrote them down on my pad, keeping one hand on the wheel.

'Thanks, Leon.'

'Where are you now?'

'I'm coming up to Serpent River,' I said. 'I've got another couple of hours to Sudbury.'

'You're making good time.' He paused. 'Listen, Alex, I left a little present for you in your truck, just in case.'

'Leon, you didn't.'

'I'm just taking care of my partner,' he said. 'You'll have to reach inside your rear bumper, on the driver's side. It's my Ruger P90.'

'How did you even get it in my truck?'

'When I came over to Vinnie's cabin. You were parked outside, remember?'

'Leon, I swear to God . . .' I thought about the customs booth I'd just rolled through, the lie I'd told the man about not having a firearm.

'Take care of yourself, Alex. I'm sorry I'm not there to cover you. Call me when you're on your way home.'

He hung up before I could say anything else.

I put the phone down for a moment, shook my head, then picked the phone back up and called the two numbers Leon had given me. I got a recording on the first number: Helen St Jean's voice telling me she couldn't come to the phone. The machine beeped and I froze.

'Helen,' I finally said, 'this is Alex McKnight. I'm sorry I'm calling

so late. This is an emergency.' I gave her my cellphone number and asked her to call me.

Then I dialled the second number. The phone rang seven times. The Trembleys apparently didn't have an answering machine. I let it ring a few more times, then hung up. I kept driving.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when I saw the Super Stack looming in the distance. It was over 1,200 feet high, the tallest freestanding smokestack in the world. I drove through the great slag heaps that dominated the western part of town. I had read that Sudbury was coming into its own lately. But it looked like it still had the heart of a mining town. I cut in off the highway, and then off that road to another, leaving any traffic behind me.

I rolled down a residential street, past dark, quiet houses. It was 1.30 a.m. I stopped for a minute, switched on my interior light and looked at the maps. The Trembleys' house was the closer. I hit the light and set off again, still going south. A streetlight was out and I almost missed the turning.

When I swung into the street, I started looking for the numbers on the houses: 212, 214, 216. I pulled over in front of the house and stepped out into the cold air. The house was dark. I went up to the front door. Why the hell not, after driving all the way up here. The front door was slightly open. I knocked lightly. Nothing.

'Hello,' I said. 'Anybody home?'

Silence.

Why was the door open? I pushed on it. It swung open a few more inches. There was a light on inside, in the back of the house.

I smelt gasoline. And something else. A smell I knew.

I should have left then. I should have turned and gone back to my truck and driven all the way home.

I didn't. I stepped into the house. A table was turned on its side, a plant lying on the floor, dirt all over the carpet. My eyes were adjusting to the dark. A hallway. A thin stream of light under a door.

The smell.

Where are you, Vinnie? Are you here?

I walked down the hallway. Quiet and normal.

I stopped at the door. I put my shoulder against it and pushed. It opened a few inches and then stopped. Something heavy was leaning against it, but there was just enough room to poke my head round. I knew what I was going to see in that room. The second that smell had hit me, I knew what I'd find. But if I thought I was ready for the sight, I was wrong. Not in a million years.

It was a bathroom. The lights were so bright it hurt my eyes after the dark hallway; the cruel whiteness of it all, the unholy sight of burnt flesh on the white, white floor. Smoke in the air.

Two bodies. One in the bathtub, the woman, her head on the edge, one arm hanging. The other body right below me, by the door. I was pushing against his legs.

I backed away from the door. It closed slightly, not all the way. I turned and went down the hallway, to the front door. I was blind now, after the bright light in the bathroom. I walked into a wall.

Careful, Alex. Take it easy.

I felt the dirt under my feet, from where the plant had tipped over. Then I was out of the front door and onto the drive, stumbling over something I couldn't see. Finally I made it to the truck, opening the door, the light coming on, closing the door, putting the key in the ignition and turning it. The engine came to life with an explosion of noise. I dropped it into gear and lurched away from the kerb.

Drive slowly. And breathe. Do I call 911 anonymously? Can they trace 911 calls from cellphones? Do they even have 911 in Canada?

I can't call it in.

Yes, I've got to. I can't let somebody find that by accident.

I'll go to Helen's place first. Then I'll call it in.

When I got back to the main road, I stopped the truck and sat there for a moment. I pulled out the other map and turned on the light. My hands were shaking. Helen's house was on the other side of town, maybe five or six miles away. I knew I had to go there.

Ron and Millie. Together they had said maybe ten words to me. But I could see them at the lodge, standing out on the dock, Ron putting his arm round his wife's shoulder.

Somebody made them get in the bathtub. He soaked them with gasoline and set them on fire.

Take this street, Alex. Watch for the next one. Keep watching.

Blood. There was blood on the floor. I had seen it, but it didn't hit me until now. Were they shot first? Were they cut?

Another street. Turn here. I'm getting close. I rolled the window down, let the cold air slap me in the face. I was in a better neighbourhood now. The houses were a little bigger, with longer driveways.

Where are you, Vinnie? I know you didn't kill those people. You are not capable of doing this. But where are you?

One more left. Then a right. I turned my lights off again, rolled slowly down the street, looking for house numbers. I stopped in front of number 77. It was a ranch house with tall, barren trees on either

side of the path. I slipped out of the truck and went to the front door. I tried turning the doorknob, but it was locked. I rang the doorbell. I heard it chime two notes, somewhere deep in the house.

Nobody answered. I went round to the side door, hidden from the street by a tall wooden fence. There was a metal storm door that had been torn off the hinges. The door inside that was open.

I stepped inside. The smell of gasoline came to me again.

But no, it wasn't like before. I could just barely smell it. I walked through the house to the back hallway, poked my head round each door. In the darkness I could barely make out the shapes of beds and dressing tables. The only sound was my own breathing.

I went into the master bedroom. There were framed pictures all over the walls, but it was too dark to see the faces. I could make out a faint light from another door. The bathroom.

I went to the door and slowly leaned against it. It creaked open. There was a small nightlight glowing above the sink. No horror in this bathroom.

I walked back down the hallway and into the kitchen, where the smell of gasoline got stronger. I stood in the darkness, trying to figure it out. Then I noticed a piece of paper on the table. I bent down and tried to read it. I could barely make out the letters.

Millie, I've gone to the lodge. Back in a couple of days. Helen.

It made no sense. I had heard her say how she wanted to get out, how much she hated that place. Why would she go back up there?

I didn't have an answer. But I knew one thing. Whoever killed Ron and Millie came here next, bringing the smell of gasoline with them. But Helen had gone to the lodge, and it had saved her life. At least for now. If they knew where the lodge was, they'd find her.

They. Who were 'they'? The same people who burned the men at the lake? Was this more of the same?

I went back out to the truck and picked up the cellphone. As I drove away, I dialled the Hearst detachment. A man answered the phone on the second ring.

'I need to know when Constable Reynaud comes on duty,' I said.

'She comes on at seven,' the man said. 'Can I help you?'

'I'm going to give you an address in Sudbury. You need to send someone over there.' I gave him the Trembleys' address.

'Sir? Can you tell me what happened?'

'Tell Constable Reynauld to call Alex,' I said. 'Tell her I didn't do this. And neither did Vinnie.'

I hung up the phone and kept driving.

EIGHT

I left Sudbury and headed north. It was three hard hours to Timmins, Ontario, another old mining town. Long ago, they had struck gold up here and you could still see the history in the names of the streets and the businesses. Prospector Street. Gold Rush Café. A sign on the highway advertised tours of one of the old mines.

It was five in the morning when I stopped to gas up and grab some coffee. Sunrise was still two hours away. I drove out of Timmins and finally hit the Trans-Canada Highway, then I headed west through Smooth Rock Falls and Kapuskasing.

The sun was just starting to come up when I reached Hearst. I drove right by the OPP station. It was just after 6.30, so Reynaud wasn't there yet. I passed the turnoff to Calstock and the Constance Lake Reserve. Being up here again, it had to be either a bad dream or a bad joke. I had spent the whole night making a big circle through Ontario, from the Soo to Sudbury to Timmins and now back on the Trans-Canada, all the way up here. A few more miles and I saw the little dirt road that led up to the lodge. How much had changed since Vinnie and I found it the first time we came up here?

There was a heavy mist hanging in the air as I turned off the highway. The early sun hadn't burned it off yet. That last morning, when we were up in the woods, the air had felt just as wet and the chill was just as penetrating. Even with the windows rolled up, I could feel it.

I took it easy going up the road. I didn't want to end up in the mud again. Plus I really didn't know what I was getting into.

My cellphone rang. I picked it up. 'Is this Reynaud?'

'McKnight, what the hell's going on? Where are you?'

'I'm at the lodge. I think Helen's here.'

'Don't move. We'll be right over.'

'Did somebody go over to the Trembleys' house?'

There was a brief silence on the line. 'Yes,' she said. 'Alex, please tell me what's happening.'

'I don't know.'

'We're on our way. Promise me you won't do anything stupid.'

'Can't do that,' I said. I hung up.

I slowed down as I came up to the sharp turn in the road. I knew the moose probably wouldn't be standing there again, but I didn't

want to take any chances. I cleared the corner. No moose. But what the hell . . .? I slammed on the brakes. There was a car off the road, in the same spot where my truck had ended up. I sat there looking at it. It was a black sedan. I recognised it.

I got out of the truck, leaving the door open. I took two steps, then turned round and went to the back of my truck. I reached under the bumper and felt for the gun Leon had hidden. It was held in place with tape. When I pulled it out, it felt cold and heavy in my hand.

I approached the back of the car, which was still on the road, but couldn't see anybody inside. My boot sank six inches into mud as I stepped off the road and made my way to the driver's window. The door was unlocked. I opened it and smelt the gasoline.

I replayed that night in my head. Red Albright's brother Dal with his big friend Jay; the way they stopped us on my road.

I popped the trunk release beneath the steering wheel, then fought my way back through the mud to the road. When I looked into the trunk, I saw the gasoline cans. It made horrible sense. If you found out who burned your brother to death, and you had a dark enough mind, you might be tempted to take your vengeance in the same way.

As I closed the trunk, I noticed a muddy board on the edge of the road. I squatted down and saw a dozen long nails pointing straight up, with three nails in the middle bent over.

That note on the table, it had been put there for a reason. 'This was a trap,' I said out loud.

Then I heard the first gunshot. The sound was deadened by the damp air, but I could tell where it was coming from. I got back in my truck and drove the last mile to the lodge. The mist got heavier as I got closer to the lake.

I heard another shot and slowed down. I sure as hell didn't want to drive right into the middle of something. There was a turn here, I thought. One final turn in the road, then it ended under those trees.

I still couldn't see very well, but I guessed I was just about there, so I stopped. I turned the engine off, grabbed Leon's gun again and stepped out. I started walking slowly, as quietly as I could. I didn't like the fact that I couldn't see more than fifty feet ahead of me. But I figured at least nobody could see me. As soon as I came round that last bend in the road, I saw a truck parked among the trees.

It was Vinnie's.

Another shot ripped through the air. This one was a lot closer. I heard another sound right after it, something long and low, like the air being let out of a balloon.

'Goddamn it,' I said under my breath. 'Vinnie, where are you?'

The sound stopped.

The fear started building in my stomach. I made my way from tree to tree. The mist seemed to be circling round me like wraiths as I moved forward. Then the lodge started to take shape in front of me. I reached the butcher's shed and put my back to the front wall, holding my weapon with two hands.

I headed for the front of the building, stopped at the corner and caught my breath, then took a quick look up the steps. They were empty. I didn't know where anyone was, or who would shoot at me if I moved, but I felt totally exposed. Here goes nothing.

I went up the steps, swearing at every creak and groan. On the front porch, I stuck my head up over the windowsill for one second, then back down. Did I see somebody in there? I needed to look again. Just wait a few seconds. Count to five. One . . . two . . .

That's as far as I got. The next gunshot was like an explosion going off inside my head. My legs went from under me and I started sliding down the steps until another blast ripped the wood apart.

They're right on top of me. I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm dead.

Back up I went, scrambling up the steps on all fours. I threw the door open and rolled inside the lodge as another shot took out the screen window. The sound of it was still roaring in my ears as I lay there, wondering if I was hit and just didn't know it yet.

And where the hell was my gun? I got to my feet and started to scan the floor. Then, out of nowhere, a voice.

'Don't move.'

I looked up. Helen St Jean was sitting in the corner, her legs drawn up to her chest. The barrel of her rifle was pointed at me over one knee. Don't move,' she said. 'Don't come any closer.'

'Helen, it's me Alex. Where's Vinnie?'

She didn't say anything.

'You've got to tell me where Vinnie is.'

She lifted the barrel and pointed it at my heart.

'Helen, please don't point that at me.'

I could see the rifle shaking in her hands. She was breathing hard.

'You need to give me that gun,' I said. 'Those men outside, they're gonna come up here.'

She looked towards the window. I kept my hands up as I slowly bent down to the floor. 'I'm coming over there,' I said. 'OK? I'm coming over there so we can fight them together.'

As I got down on my knees and started inching over to her, she

didn't follow me with the rifle. I took that as a good sign.

'I was a police officer, Helen. OK? Give me the gun.'

I got closer. I could almost touch her. And then everything came apart. A gun blast ripped through the air. And then another, as I grabbed for the rifle. The second shot was even louder, so loud it made my ears ring.

There was something hot in my hand. The rifle barrel. Somebody was on the steps. I couldn't hear it, but I could feel the slight vibration in the floor. Somebody was coming up to the door. I put the butt against my shoulder and aimed for the doorway, chest high.

A body. A face. Long hair.

It was Maskwa.

I pulled the rifle up. Maskwa took one step through the door and paused. For one heart-stopping moment, he kept his rifle trained right at my head. Then he lowered it.

'Alex.'

I opened my mouth, but I didn't know what to say. He put his hand up to shush me, came over and bent down next to Helen. Her hands were clamped down hard over her ears. Her eyes were closed.

'Helen,' he said. 'It's OK now.'

She didn't move.

'It's OK,' he said. He put one hand on the back of her head.

'Maskwa,' I said. 'Are you gonna tell me what's going on?'

'Yes,' he said. 'But wait—' He turned to look back at the door. 'Vinnie's still outside somewhere. We split up.'

Maskwa stroked Helen's hair and told her we'd be right back. She didn't open her eyes or take her hands away from her ears. He whispered something else into her ear and stood up.

When we got outside, I saw a body beyond the steps. The man was lying face-down in the dirt, a hole blown right through his back.

'Oh God, no,' I said.

'Alex, that's not Vinnie.'

I let out my breath. When I got closer, I could see the man's face. 'This is Red's brother, Dallas.'

'Whatever you say,' Maskwa said.

I saw a Beretta lying on the ground next to the body. The same gun he had held against Vinnie's head the night they stopped us.

'There was another man . . . a big one.'

'I think he may be over behind that shed. By the dock.'

'Maskwa, how come you're here?'

'Hold on, Alex. Let's find him first.' He stood there looking all

around him, like he was maybe playing the whole thing back in his mind, frame by frame. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. Over this way. I never saw him after he shot the other one.'

He went down to the end of the dock. The big man was on the ground just behind the boat shed. Maskwa stopped right next to him, his foot an inch away from the dead man's curled fingers. 'Where is Vinnie?' he said. 'Oh, come on, please.'

I came up next to him. I didn't say a word.

'There,' he said. There were some thin trees scattered just a few yards from the shed, then some thick, tall weeds as the shoreline gave way to the forest. Maskwa ran into the slight gap he had spotted. I was right behind him. When he stopped, I almost ran over him.

Vinnie was kneeling on the ground, his head hanging like he had got this far and then given up. Maskwa put his hand on his shoulder. Vinnie picked his head up, shaking his hair away from his face.

'Did you get the other one?' he said.

'Yes,' Maskwa said. 'I did.'

'Alex,' he said, as he stood up slowly. 'You're here.'

'Yeah, I'm here. I went to Sudbury first.'

That stopped him for a second. Then he picked up his rifle and brushed off the leaves. 'You saw what happened?'

'Yes.'

'How did you know to go there?'

'I was in your cabin,' I said. 'Leon helped me find the maps you printed out. What was the article in the *Detroit News* about? Whatever it was, it brought you all the way up here again.'

He didn't say anything.

'Vinnie, the police are coming.'

'What?'

'The OPP are on their way. I called Reynaud.'

'Come on,' he said. 'We've got to figure out what to do.'

The three of us went back to the lodge. Helen hadn't moved. She was still huddled in the corner.

Maskwa went down on his knees and spoke to her in a low voice. 'It's over,' he said. 'It's over.'

She looked up and scanned our faces, one by one. She didn't look surprised. She was probably way beyond surprise at that point.

'We have to get you out of here,' Vinnie said. 'You can't be here when the police come.'

'Vinnie,' I said, 'what are you talking about?'

'We'll explain later. Right now we've got to get her out of here.'

'Vinnie, you should take her to my house,' Maskwa said.

'I can't ask you to stay here,' Vinnie said.

'If you're here, they'll ask you why you came looking for Helen.'

Vinnie thought about it. 'Yes, you're right.'

'Do you guys know what you're doing?' I asked.

'You've got to trust us, Alex. OK? Just trust us for now.'

I took a long breath. 'Right,' I said. 'Get going. Give me your rifle.'

'When you hit the main road, head west,' Maskwa said. 'Give them a chance to come up the service road, then double back. We'll meet you at my house.'

'We'll see you there,' Vinnie said. He threw me his rifle, then he and Helen were out of the door.

I waited with Maskwa while Vinnie fired up the truck and took off.

'Maskwa, can you tell me what's going on now?'

'It's Helen's story,' he said. 'She'll tell you.'

'OK, fine. So what do we say when the police get here?'

'You came looking for Vinnie, and you picked me up to help you.'

'I talked to Reynaud just before I got here. I didn't say anything about you being with me.'

'That doesn't mean I wasn't with you.'

'Maybe,' I said. 'We might be able to sell it.'

'We split up and searched the place, looking for Helen and Vinnie. Then those men got here. They started shooting at you, so we had to kill them. It was self-defence. We never saw Vinnie, and we never saw Helen. We have no idea where they are. That's our story.'

'As soon as we're done here, I get all the answers, right?'

He gave me a tired smile as we heard the police cars arrive. 'You and me both. They still haven't told me.'

MASKWA AND I spent the next four hours at the lodge, telling our story over and over. Staff Sergeant Moreland was there, of course, and as he listened to me going over the whole thing, he had a look on his face like he wished I had never set foot in Ontario. Not that I could blame him. DeMers and Gannon and Tom LeBlanc and four men from Detroit were dead, and now there were two more.

I saw Boxer Face and Suntan standing there for a moment, looking down at the other body, the one by the shed, and I saw a couple of other constables who had kept guard over me in the medical centre. The one person I didn't see was Natalie Reynaud. When I asked the sergeant where she was, he told me she was back at the detachment and left it at that. Then he told me to go home and to

wait by my phone in case he needed me for more questions. Aside from that, he didn't want to ever see me or hear from me again.

When we were finally in my truck, I took my last look at the lodge and then fired the engine. 'Come on, Maskwa,' I said. 'Let's get the hell out of here.' I turned the truck round and headed off down the gravel road.

Minutes later, we passed the sedan, its front wheels off the road.

'Why did you set the trap so far from the lodge?' I asked. 'You gave them a chance to regroup.'

'It wasn't supposed to happen that way. We were going to take Helen to the lodge, get her settled in there and then come back out. Vinnie misjudged how much of a lead we had.'

'Why not just leave her at your house?'

'You saw what they did to Helen's friends,' Maskwa said. 'We weren't going to let her out of our sight.'

'So why did Vinnie come up here? And why did he come alone?'

'He told me he didn't want to drag you up here again.'

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. When Vinnie needed help, he chose one of his own people again. Not me.

Maskwa seemed to pick up on it. 'It was too late to call you,' he said. 'He needed help and I was right here.'

I didn't say anything. I turned onto the road to Calstock, passing the spot where we had found the Suburban. There was no trace of what had happened there now.

We drove past the sign welcoming us to the Constance Lake Reserve. The lake appeared on our left, and then the road to Maskwa's house. When we arrived, Vinnie's truck was parked outside.

As we pulled in, Guy and his mother came out of their house next door and joined us. All six of us crowded into Maskwa's small living room and Maskwa threw some more wood into his stove.

'How did it go?' Vinnie asked. He was sitting in the back corner, farthest away from the fire. Helen was on the couch, watching the fire through the glass door on the stove.

'We got through it,' I said. 'They wanted to know where you and Helen were. We told them we didn't know.'

'Thank you.'

I was just about to ask when the explanations would begin, but then, for the first time in my life, I found a measure of patience.

Maskwa made coffee and the rest of us sat there in silence while he poured it into cups. Finally, Vinnie took a piece of paper from his pocket and gave it to me. Helen didn't look at me. She didn't move.

I unfolded the paper and read it. It was a reprint from the *Detroit News*, dated January 21, 1985. The headline read: DEATH TOLL IN HOTEL FIRE GROWS TO TWENTY-SEVEN. The picture, a grainy, black and white photograph, showed the burnt-out remains of a building, a hotel on Warren Avenue, near Wayne State University.

The story itself started out with two more people dying at the hospital. Most of the dead were Canadians. A junior high-school class had come down from Sudbury to take part in a choral concert at the college. Nineteen of the dead were students.

I looked up at Helen. She was still staring at the fire. Something came to me then, something she had said to me at the lodge.

No kids. None of them had kids. It was what they all had in common—Helen, Hank, Ron and Millie.

I went back to the article. The fire had started next door, in a dry cleaner's, and had spread to the hotel. There was some question about the sprinkler system in the hotel, and the fire exits. An investigation was under way.

I looked at the date on the article again and thought back to January 1985. That was right in the middle of my lost year, the year after my partner and I were gunned down, the year after my marriage ended and I left the police force. I remembered the fire, but only vaguely. It was just something on the front page of the newspaper.

The last paragraph was a long list. I scanned through the names. I found Stephanie Gannon, 13. I found Melissa St Jean, 13. I found Brett Trembley, 13, and Barry Trembley, 13.

This time when I looked up at Helen she cleared her throat and spoke. 'Now you know,' she said. She didn't look at me.

Maskwa handed me a hot cup of coffee. He sat down next to Guy's mother. Guy was sitting on the floor next to Vinnie. They were all watching the flames in the wood stove.

'Melissa and Stephanie were best friends,' Helen said. 'They were in that room together. They were planning on going to college together. One day they were going to be bridesmaids for each other.'

She swallowed hard.

'They say the smoke gets you first. They say you never feel the fire itself. You don't even wake up. But it started at midnight. That's the thing. In a hotel room by themselves for the first time, there's no way those two kids would have been sleeping at midnight.'

She looked down at the coffee cup in her hands, and a single tear ran down her cheek.

'Afterwards, we'd all get together once a week. All the parents.

We'd try to help each other. After about a year, people started to drop out of the group. It was time to move on, they said.

Another long silence. The wood crackled in the stove.

'Maybe it was unhealthy, holding on to each other like that. All these years. But we were all we had. Nobody else could understand. I couldn't be with somebody else, somebody who didn't know how it felt. So we stayed together.'

She wiped her nose with her hand.

'Claude tried to look after us,' she said. It took me a moment to realise who she was talking about. 'As much as he was grieving himself, losing his daughter, I think he felt responsible for us.'

Claude. I looked back down at the article, scanned the list of names. I didn't see anyone named DeMers.

'Her name was Olivia Markel,' Helen said. 'That was her married name. She was the music teacher.'

I found the name. Olivia Markel, 27.

'Claude found out about the investigation,' she said. 'He had a friend, a detective down in Detroit.'

I skimmed through the article again. 'The hotel,' I said. 'The sprinklers and the fire exits.'

'No,' she said. 'The dry cleaner's next door. They were trying to put an arson case together. I guess it's a hard thing to do. Especially a place like that, with all the chemicals . . . It's not enough to prove that it was set intentionally. You have to prove that the owners did it themselves, or paid somebody else to do it.'

'The owners—?'

'Red Albright. And his little gang. There were five of them. They owned a lot of businesses back then. The dry cleaner's wasn't doing so well, so they burned it down. That's what happened. The police couldn't prove it. But that's what happened.'

'I'm not getting some of this,' I said. 'I'm sorry. How did they get up here, all these years later?'

She shook her head. 'Claude shouldn't have told us about the investigation. I know he regretted doing so. The way it just kept eating at us . . . Especially Hank. It was driving him crazy. He was going to go after them himself, he said. For a while, it was all he ever thought about. When we all bought the lodge together, he used to sit there by the fireplace and try to come up with the best way to get those men, every one of them. He knew he could go down there anytime and ring their doorbells and see their faces. It was just . . . what to do next. I thought I had finally convinced him that he'd just ruin

what was left of his life. And then he called us. Albright himself.'

'Of all the places to go hunting in Canada,' I said, 'he called you?'

'He said they'd got tired of hunting deer and wanted to try something bigger. They'd heard there were some good moose lakes up here. Our lodge just happened to be the one they chose. Just when I thought Hank was getting to be himself again . . . He told me it was just a twist of fate. Like we were finally being given the chance to see the men who killed our children.'

I knew it wasn't that simple. They may have burned down their business, whether they had been charged for it or not. The fire spread into the hotel, which may or may not have been up to fire codes. It was a whole chain of events that might have turned out a hundred different ways. But I wasn't going to say that to her.

'When those men got here, I was afraid to even look at them. But Hank, he was out there shaking their hands, looking each one of them in the eyes. If I had done that . . .' She stopped. She looked back at Vinnie. 'If I had done that, I might have seen your brother. I might have seen that he didn't belong.'

Vinnie didn't say anything. The light from the fire was reflected in his eyes.

Five men. That's all Hank had seen. Albright and his business associates. Five men.

'Hank flew them out to Lake Agawaatese. It's the farthest away. There aren't even many moose up there. Just bears.' She kept looking at Vinnie. 'I didn't know, Vinnie.' She said it like she was still trying to convince him. 'I didn't know what he was going to do.'

'You knew he was going to kill them,' Vinnie said. 'How could you not know? All of you.'

'Ron knew. He was with Hank, out at the lake. He and Hank . . . did it together. And then Ron and Hank took the Suburban out that morning, the morning they were supposed to have flown back. They took the Suburban and left it in the woods. I didn't know at the time. I wasn't there. Hank told us to go away, me and Millie. We came back the next Saturday. The Suburban was gone. At first I thought maybe . . . I don't know . . . maybe they didn't do anything after all. Maybe they flew them back. Then Hank told me. "It's done," he said. That's what he said to me. "It's done."'

'You knew, Helen.'

'Yes,' she said, in a voice so low I could barely hear her. 'I knew.'

'What about DeMers?'

'He didn't even know those men were here. Not until after. They

came out to the lodge, Claude and his partner—what was her name?'

'Reynaud,' I said. 'Natalie Reynaud.'

'They came out that morning, when the call came up from Detroit about the missing men. That's when Hank took him aside and told him what had happened. I thought Claude would strangle him.'

'What was he going to do about it? He was a police officer.'

'Yes, and he had taken an oath. He said that to Hank. He had to turn us in. All of us. But then—'

'What?'

'He didn't. He just didn't.'

I thought about DeMers, about the way he had treated us. The hot-and-cold act, and everything he had said and done to convince us to go home and to stay there. It all made sense now.

'What about later?' I said. 'When he flew up with Hank?'

'I was there when Claude came over. He said that you and Vinnie had flown up to the lake, and that you were still up there. Hank got his rifle and tried to put it in the plane, and Claude asked him what he was doing. Hank said he'd have to take care of things if you and Vinnie had found out what they'd done. Claude told him that wasn't going to happen. They were going to fly up and bring the two of you back. And if you'd found out, then we'd all just have to deal with it.'

She looked back at Vinnie again. 'Claude said there was already one dead innocent man. He wasn't going to let it happen to two more.'

Vinnie nodded his head once.

'I swear to God,' Helen said. 'I thought that was going to be the end of it. But Hank must have sneaked that rifle onto the plane somehow. They flew up there . . . And Hank, he must have—'

She started crying.

'He was protecting us,' she said. 'That goddamn fool. And now he's gone. And Claude is gone. Ron and Millie are gone. Everybody's gone except me.'

Maskwa got up from his chair and went to her. He stood over her and gently placed one hand to the side of her face. Vinnie stayed in the corner, looking up at the ceiling, blinking away the tears.

'You didn't come up here for revenge,' Maskwa said to him. 'You came up here to help them.'

'I had my friend at the *News* run their names,' Vinnie said. 'It was so easy to find that article. I knew it would be just as easy for anybody else. Alex was there when Albright's brother stopped us. He saw the way he and the other men both seemed to think about it, like they had some idea . . . I knew they'd find them sooner or later.'

'Would you have done the same for Ron?' I said. 'If you had got to him in time?'

Vinnie closed his eyes. 'It has to stop somewhere, Alex. OK? Those kids died in that fire. Hank and Ron, they killed Albright and those other men. And my brother with them. They burned them. So Albright's brother came up to kill some more. More fire, Alex. What am I supposed to do? Go burn some more of them?' He opened his eyes. 'No more. This is where it ends. Helen has to go somewhere where they won't find her.'

'I know where we can go,' Maskwa said. 'I can get the plane ready.'

I didn't have to ask what they were talking about. I knew there were a dozen places they could take her, like maybe Moosonee, on James Bay. Once she was there, she could either go to one of the other reserves on the Ontario side of James Bay, or take the ferry over to Quebec. Nobody would ever find her. Not the police, not the men from Detroit.

'No,' Helen said. She took Maskwa's hand away from her face. 'You're not taking me anywhere. I'm not running away.'

'Helen, you have to—'

'No, Vinnie. I waited until Alex and Maskwa got here, so they could hear the whole story. Now I'm going to tell the police everything that happened.' She hesitated. 'Everything except Claude. He died a hero. Let him stay a hero.'

'They'll find out eventually.'

'Maybe, maybe not,' she said. 'But I don't have to tell them.'

'Helen . . .' Vinnie tried to find some words but couldn't.

'Let's go,' she said. 'Let's go and do this right now.'

They tried to talk her out of it, but it was obvious her mind was made up. A few minutes later, we were standing outside watching Vinnie and Helen drive away. Helen looked at us through her window, then lifted her hand and put it flat against the glass.

I said my own goodbyes to Maskwa, this incredible man, and to Guy and his mother. I got in my truck and started down the road. There were snowflakes in the air again. I drove down the empty highway to the station in Hearst, and parked next to Vinnie's truck. I knew it would be a long wait, so I settled in and went to sleep.

A couple of hours later, I picked my head up and saw Vinnie coming out of the station. He was alone, and he looked as tired and miserable as any man I had ever seen.

He gave me a nod and got into his truck, and then I followed him all the way home.

NINE

That winter came in as if it wasn't really sure of its mission. It would snow a few inches, then stop. We never got buried. It would go down to zero at night, but we didn't have any of those thirty-below nights where you worry about your pipes freezing.

When Christmas came, I had my busiest holiday in years. I started out with my new adopted family over at Vinnie's mother's house, had lunch with Jackie at the Glasgow, and then I headed over to Leon's house for dinner. I gave toys to his kids and a bottle of wine to Eleanor, and they actually seemed to enjoy having me around this time. It helped that I wasn't asking Leon to do any private-eye work.

Until after dinner.

Eleanor was putting the kids to bed when I told him what I was thinking about. I had seen what Vinnie had done for Helen. I was thinking maybe I could do something for somebody, too.

'And maybe a little bit for yourself?' Leon said.

'OK, maybe. Just a little bit.'

He called me a couple of days later. I sat on the whole idea for a couple more days. Maybe I was trying to talk myself out of it. I woke up on the morning of New Year's Eve convinced it was a bad idea.

Some time late that afternoon, I changed my mind.

I had a bottle of champagne in my fridge. I had been saving it for God knows what, for drinking by myself again on another New Year's Eve. This year I might have shared it with Vinnie and his family. Or maybe Jackie and Leon. I had more family now than ever.

But that wasn't enough. For some reason, after what I had been through, I felt like I needed something more.

I put the bottle of champagne in the truck and drove out into the cold day. I had the plough on the front of the truck; even with no snow on the ground, I was ready.

I drove over the bridge. The man in the customs booth looked my truck over and asked me if I had heard something about a snow-storm. I told him no, but the minute I took the plough off we'd get dumped on. He thought that was funny. He wished me a Happy New Year and sent me on my way.

I had the directions on the seat next to me, courtesy of Leon. The address was in Blind River, a little town on the North Channel. I

took the Queen's Highway out of Sault Ste Marie, following the same road I had taken when I was looking for Vinnie. This time there was a lot less at stake. So why did I feel so nervous?

The sun was going down when I hit Blind River, the days so damned short now. I found the intersection in the middle of town, took a left and headed north. The town gave way to wetlands and empty fields spotted with thin traces of snow. I went over a little bridge and found the farmhouse on the right, set back from the road. I pulled up the gravel driveway and stopped. There was a car parked in front of a small barn, but the house looked dark.

I got out and went to the front porch. There was a Christmas wreath hanging on the door. I rang the bell and waited. Twenty seconds passed. I rang the bell again.

The door opened. Natalie Reynaud stood there in the light of the doorway. She was wearing jeans and a white cotton shirt, and she looked at me like I was the last person she ever expected to see standing on her porch. Which I suppose I was.

'McKnight?'

'Good evening.'

'What are you . . .? What is this?'

'I'm here to give you something. May I come in?'

She didn't move. 'What are you talking about?' She looked down at the bottle in my hand. 'Did you come here to give me a bottle of champagne?'

'No,' I said. 'Something else. The champagne is just . . . ' I ran out of words. At that moment, I started to feel like an idiot and I might have left if she hadn't opened the door all the way for me.

'Come on in,' she said. 'You're letting the warm out.'

'My father used to say that,' I said as I stepped inside. 'You're letting the warm out.'

She stood in front of me with her arms folded. 'I'm not on the job right now,' she said. 'I took a leave.'

'I know,' I said. 'I mean, I don't know, but I'm not surprised. I did the same thing myself.'

She kept one arm folded around her and ran the other through her hair. 'McKnight, I don't know how you found me, or why you came all the way out here, but—'

'Here,' I said. I gave her the piece of paper.

She took it from me. She held it for a moment like she was unsure what to do with it. Then she unfolded it and read the article. She read it quickly and then she looked up at me. 'What's this about?'

'Can we sit down?'

'Over here,' she said. She led me to her dining-room table. It was an antique oak table with ornate claw feet, and it matched the rest of the room perfectly.

'It's a nice house,' I said.

'It's my grandparents' house.'

I looked out into the next room. 'I hope I'm not disturbing them.'

'I doubt it. They're both dead.'

I sat down at the table. My collar felt hot around my neck.

'Look,' she said, 'are you going to tell me what this article means?'

'Read the names again,' I said.

She sat down across from me and looked at the article again. The expression on her face changed. 'Gannon. St Jean. Trembley.' She looked at me. 'Where did you get this?'

'Someone at the newspaper ran a search with those names.'

'I know what happened up at that lodge,' she said. 'I read your statement. Was that the way it really went?'

'I thought you said you were on leave.'

'I'm getting a little concerned here. Maybe you should go.'

'There's another name in that list,' I said. 'Olivia Markel.'

She looked at it again. 'I see it. What about her?'

'Her father was your partner.'

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. 'Claude had a daughter? He never said anything about her.'

'It was a long time ago. Before you even knew him, I'm sure.'

'I don't get it. What does this have to do with . . . with anything?'

'They were all together,' I said. 'Those people at the lodge, and Claude. They've been together ever since that fire in Detroit.'

'But Gannon—' She thought hard about it. 'Gannon was the one who killed Claude.'

'In the end, yes. When Vinnie and I found out what they had done to those men, Claude apparently wanted Gannon to come clean.'

'How do you know this?'

'Do you have something like the Fifth Amendment in Canada?'

'Just tell me.'

'I have to know I can trust you.'

She looked at me for ever. Somewhere in the house, a grandfather clock chimed nine times. 'Tell me,' she said.

I told her about Helen, and what Vinnie and Maskwa had done for her. And my own part in it. I told her the whole story. When I was done, she sat back in her chair and closed her eyes.

'They'll find out eventually,' she said. 'Someone else will make the connection.'

'Someday,' I said. 'Maybe. But it doesn't have to come from you.'

'So is that why you came here? To tell me the truth about Claude? Is that going to change anything?'

'Yes,' I said. 'It changes everything. He left you behind for a reason. You don't have to blame yourself any more.'

She shook her head. 'I understand what you're trying to tell me. But—'

'Why are you here?' I said.

'What do you mean?'

'In this house. It looks like it hasn't changed in fifty years.'

'When I took the leave,' she said, 'I came back here.' She looked up at the ceiling, like she could see through it to the farthest corners of the house. 'This place means a lot to me, but I'm wondering if maybe it's time to do something with it.'

'Just like me,' I said. 'For me, it was my father's cabins.'

She put her elbows on the table. She leaned forward and looked at me closely. 'I'll give you one thing,' she said. 'You were right about the people at work. Nobody would even look me in the eye any more.'

That was all I needed, just the way she had moved towards me. It was a little thing, just a few inches. But it was enough. I was building another bridge over another chasm, this one maybe the biggest of all. Another bridge, another connection. Another step for me on my way back into the human race.

Outside, a northern wind picked up. It was cold out there.

'You've been through it,' she said. 'You know how it feels.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But I had to do it alone.'

She kept looking at me. 'What am I supposed to do now?'

'It's New Year's Eve,' I said. 'You feel like making a toast?'

'Depends on what kind of champagne you brought. Is it any good?'

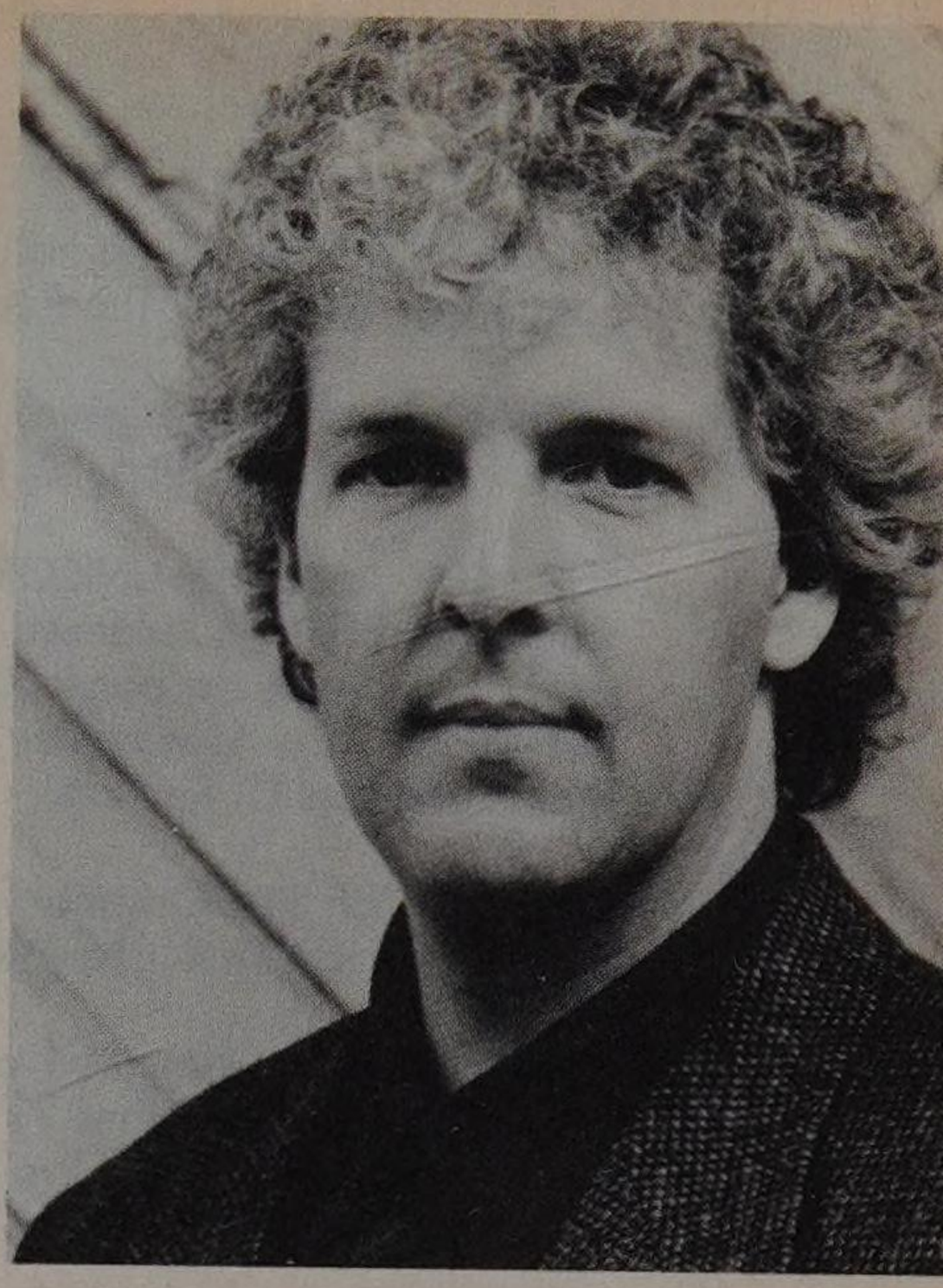
'Hell if I know.'

'I'll get the glasses,' she said. 'Don't go away.'

I didn't. And that's how it began.

Happy New Year.

STEVE HAMILTON



Steve Hamilton is the only author to have been awarded both the Shamus and Edgar awards for a first novel. *A Cold Day in Paradise* introduced his series hero, Alex McKnight, who has since featured in a further four novels, including *Blood is the Sky*. Here the author explains the inspiration behind the latest McKnight adventure, set in the far north of Canada.

'If you ever feel like getting away from it all, and I mean really getting away, go up into northern Ontario, as far as the roads will take you. When the road ends, have somebody take you up in a little floatplane and drop you off on a remote fishing outpost. Don't worry, they'll come back for you. In a week or so. In the meantime, you'll be more alone than you've ever been in your life, unless you count the moose and the bears and the fish. Or unless you're lucky enough to have dragged the right friends out there with you.

'I have friends, going all the way back to high school in Michigan, who do this remote fly-in fishing every summer without fail. I go with them sometimes, but not often enough. I'd probably be more sane if I did. Or maybe not. The last time I went up there, I spent a lot of time imagining all of the bad things that can happen to you if you're stranded a hundred miles away from the nearest phone, or the nearest building, or the nearest anything. What happens if you get sick? Or if you have an accident? What do you do if you have to wait six or seven days for help to arrive? Worse yet, what do you do if you suddenly realise that the men who are finally flying out to you aren't coming to help you at all?

'OK, so I get carried away with it. But that's what writers do, right? They sit in the boat with their line in the water, hoping that the fish won't disturb them while they dream up their stories. That's how I got that first glimmer of an idea that would one day end up in *Blood Is The Sky*.'

Steve Hamilton was born and raised in Detroit, and now lives in upstate New York with his wife Julia and their two children. As well as pursuing his successful writing career, he also works full time at his 'regular job' with IBM, and sleeps when he can.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND PICTURE CREDITS: *The Distant Echo*: pages 6–8: rose: Barry Anderson/The Image Bank/Getty Images; landscape: Richard Elliott/Stone/Getty Images; *Trojan Odyssey*: pages 150–151: submarine: Cousteau Society/The Image Bank/Getty Images; cave: Getty Images; diver: Taxi/Getty Images; page 152: Stephen Frink/The Image Bank/Getty Images; page 297: Lawrence Ratzkin/Granger Collection, New York; *The Lady and the Unicorn*: pages 298–300: © Francis G. Mayer/Corbis; *Blood is the Sky*: pages 402–404: moose: Lewis Kemper/Stone/Getty Images; landscape: Photodisc/Getty Images; page 539 © Phyllis McCabe.

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Printed by Maury Imprimeur SA, Malesherbes, France
Bound by Reliures Brun SA, Malesherbes, France

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